



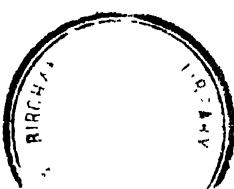
# *Indian Film*

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COURTESY CINÉMATHÈQUE FRANÇAISE

*Bombay: Calcutta: Madras: New Delhi*



# Indian Film



*Orient Longmans*



# *Preface*

India, one of the most prolific film-making nations, has produced several films counted among the world's finest. . . Early in 1963 India completed its fiftieth year of feature production; its activity in short films goes back to the nineteenth century. . . The Indian film industry, alone among major film industries, developed in a colonial setting. It was outproducing Great Britain by the mid-1920s. . . An unusually strict film censorship, established in the colonial era, remains characteristic of the Indian film scene. . . The Indian film is unique in its extensive use of dance and song, often in operatic forms. In this, Indian film is part of a theatrical tradition that goes back to Sanskrit drama. . . Although Indian sound films have been produced in quantity since 1931, more than twenty years went by before a producer dared to make one without songs or dances. . . Indian film-fan publications are numerous and some have huge circulations. . . The Indian film industry, unlike the American and Japanese industries, has a polyglot home market and makes feature films in more than a dozen Indian languages. . . India, like several other Asian countries, requires theatres to show an approved informational film at every showing. To supply such films the government has developed a large public-sector film unit. . . Tension between government and the private film industry has been frequent in recent years. . . Indian-language films have a regular export market in many countries of Asia and Africa and are a source of Indian prestige in the Afro-Asian world. . . Songs from Indian films, often criticized by Indian musicologists as hybrid and Westernized, are Afro-Asian radio favorites; a few have been hits in the Soviet Union. . . In recent years there have been Italian-Indian, U.K.-Indian, USSR-Indian, and U.S.-Indian co-productions in India. They have been the subject of high diplomacy and sometimes tension.

It was the consideration of such facts that led us to make the study that became *Indian Film*. We first discussed the project during 1960–61 when Mr. Krishnaswamy was obtaining his master's degree at Co-

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# *Indian Film*

### *Note*

*1 rupee = 16 annas. Since 1957 India has been converting to a decimal system—1 rupee = 100 naye paise—but the “anna” persists in popular language. In terms of American currency the rupee has been approximately 21¢ since Indian independence; it was between 30¢ and 40¢ during earlier decades covered by this book. For approximate, rapid calculation it is suggested the reader use the formula \$1 = Rs. 3 for the years 1896–1948, and the formula \$1 = Rs. 5 for the years 1949–63.*

# *Beginnings*

Many Western filmgoers first became aware of India as a film-producing nation, as a result of the international triumphs of Satyajit Ray. These began when *Pather Panchali* (Song of the Road), the first film directed by Ray, came from obscurity to win the "best human document" award at the 1956 Cannes film festival, and continued as the film won awards at the San Francisco, Manila, Vancouver, and Stratford, Ontario, festivals. In 1957 its sequel *Aparajito* (The Unvanquished) won the Golden Lion award at Venice as well as the Selznick Golden Laurel Trophy in the United States. Two years later the final film of the trilogy, *Apur Sansar* (The World of Apu), took another astonishing sequence of prizes.

These were by no means the first Indian films to win foreign festival recognition. But Ray's trilogy, unlike earlier entries, followed these victories with commercial runs on every continent, and so it was the Indian films of Satyajit Ray that finally captured the attention of many average filmgoers of the Western world, and won from many the tribute of surprise: "India: I didn't know they made films."

For the surprised, further jolts were in store. Western writers on

film topics now began to supply occasional pertinent facts. As critic and film historian Arthur Knight put it, "After India's Satyajit Ray won top honors at Cannes . . . and at Venice . . . it suddenly became impossible to ignore completely the Indian film industry any longer."<sup>1</sup> Thus Western readers learned that the Indian film industry not only existed but was, in fact, huge. By 1958, in the production of feature films, India was revealed to be outproducing the United States and every European film-producing nation. Statistics for that year showed the following number of feature films produced:<sup>2</sup>

Japan	516	Italy	137
India	295	USSR	130
United States	288	France	126
Hong Kong	240	United Kingdom	121

There were further surprises. Film history has been written largely by European and American writers. For most of them, the Asian film has scarcely existed.<sup>3</sup> Yet the story of film, in various parts of Asia, goes back almost to the beginnings of film history, and contributes some arresting sidelights to its world development.

### *A train arriving*

When the brothers' Louis and Auguste Lumière unveiled their *cinématographe* in the basement of the Grand Café in Paris on December 28, 1895, they apparently felt an urgent need for rapid exploitation. A fear that the novelty of the invention might be short-lived, and awareness of the activity of rival entrepreneurs, combined to press them to rapid action. Soon after the Paris demonstration various teams of Lumière agents, each equipped with the

<sup>1</sup> Knight, *The Liveliest Art*, p. 234.

<sup>2</sup> *Basic Facts and Figures*, pp. 146-47.

<sup>3</sup> Bardèche and Brasillach, in their *History of Motion Pictures* (1935; Eng. tr., 1938), gave four paragraphs to Japan, one to India. Rotha in *The Film Till Now* (1930, 1949, 1951 eds.) gave three paragraphs to Japan, one to India; in a 1960 edition Richard Griffith added to this. Knight in *The Liveliest Art* (1957) gave five pages to Japan, two sentences to India; he amplified this in a 1959 edition. A milestone in Western recognition of Asian film development was the appearance of Anderson and Richie, *The Japanese Film*, in 1959.

The life-like manner in which the various views were portrayed on the screen by the aid of a powerful lantern, and the distinctness with which each action of moving bodies were [sic] brought out showed to what an advanced stage the art of photography and the magic lantern had been brought, something like seven or eight hundred photographs being thrown on the screen within the space of a minute. The views being of a varied character found much favour, the more crowded scenes being applauded by the audience.<sup>8</sup>

The shows were advertised regularly in the *Times of India*. The phrase "tonight entire change" appears in several advertisements.

By the end of July the showings had acquired two indigenous aspects. "Reserved boxes for Purdah Ladies and their Families" were announced late in July. And a broad scale of prices was introduced. For the first showing there had been a single admission price of one rupee. Now prices ranged from a low of four annas to a high of two rupees.<sup>9</sup> This wide price range was to remain a feature of film exhibition in India, important to its future growth and range of appeal.

In early August the drawing power of the attraction seems to have waned. The *Times of India* editorially rebuked "our Parsee friends" for not taking more interest in the unique event.<sup>10</sup> The addition of "selections of suitable music under the direction of S. Seymour Dove" does not seem to have helped, and August 15 was announced as "POSITIVELY THE LAST exhibition in Bombay." A performance of *The Pickpocket* by the Thespian Club—"Soldiers & Sailors Half Price to Back Seats"—was already advertised for the following week.<sup>11</sup>

The Lumière's sense of urgency was justified by events of the following months. In January, 1897, "Stewart's Vitograph" (sic) came to the Gaiety Theatre and apparently ran about a week.<sup>12</sup> In September the "Hughes Moto-Photoscope, the latest marvel in cinematographs," began showings at various locations including fairgrounds.<sup>13</sup> The following year brought a Professor Anderson and Mlle Blanche and their "Andersonoscopograph" exhibiting varied items.<sup>14</sup> While Bombay was receiving these, Calcutta, at this time

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, July 22, 1896.      <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, July 27, 1896.      <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, August 5, 1896.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, August 15, 1896.      <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, January 4, 1897.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, September 15, 1897.      <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, December 26, 1898.

the capital of British India, was also visited by various expeditions, including that of a Mr. Stevens who is said to have exhibited short items at the Star Theatre after stage performances.<sup>15</sup>

It seems clear, in spite of the four-anna seats and the attention to purdah ladies, that these early showings attracted mainly British residents, along with a few Indians "of the educated classes"—especially those who identified their interests with those of the British. At the same time, the impact on Indians who attended was crucially important. Among those who saw the Lumière exhibition was Harischandra Sakhararam Bhatvadekar, a Maharashtrian. According to his obituary notice in a Bombay trade publication,<sup>16</sup> Bhatvadekar had opened a photographic studio in Bombay about 1880. In 1896 he was so "hypnotized" by the Lumière showing that he ordered a motion picture camera from London, at a price of 21 guineas—probably the first imported. When it arrived the following year he photographed a wrestling match at Bombay's Hanging Gardens, and sent the film to London for processing. He had meanwhile bought a projector and become an itinerant, open-air exhibitor of imported films. Among these, months later, he was able to show his own wrestling-match film. His second subject is said to have been the training of circus monkeys. More important was his coverage of an event of December, 1901. An Indian student at Cambridge, R. P. Paranjpye, had won special distinction in mathematics, and his return to India was an occasion for wild jubilation and garlanding. It was the sort of occasion that aroused nationalist emotions in Indian hearts, and at the same time was noted with prideful interest by the British. It thus received enormous attention and has won a place in some Indian film chronologies as "the first newsreel event."<sup>17</sup>

In 1903 the durbar that celebrated the coronation of Edward VII with oriental and occidental splendor was another event photographed and shown by Bhatvadekar. His work as pioneer exhibitor led to a career as manager of Bombay's Gaiety Theatre—later re-

<sup>15</sup> *Amrita*, December 29, 1961.

<sup>16</sup> *Indian Documentary*, Vol. IV, Nos. 3-4 (1958).

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, "Landmarks in Indian Film Story," in *Indian Talkie*, 1931-56, pp. 17-18. R. P. Paranjpye eventually became vice-chancellor of the University of Poona.

named the Capitol Cinema. He eventually gave up production for exhibition and, perhaps in consequence, died with "quite a fortune."<sup>18</sup> Not all his fellow pioneers were similarly blessed.

Bhatvadekar's career suggests the rapid pace of events. The traveling missions from Europe and America were quickly followed by importation of films, projectors, and other equipment. Some of the missions, in fact, functioned as sales agents. Among the purchasers, a number took up cinematography and began to turn out such items as *Poona Races '98* and *Train Arriving at Bombay Station*—both advertised in December, 1898.<sup>19</sup> The typical film showman of the time, as elsewhere in the world, was the photographer-exhibitor.

Films continued to turn up in theatres, sometimes as supplements to plays, concerts, or performances of magic. In Bombay, in 1898, Carl Hertz, "absolutely the world's greatest conjuror," offered film items in color along with his magic show. In Calcutta, Hiralal Sen, who purchased equipment in the same year,<sup>20</sup> photographed scenes from some of the plays at the Classic Theatre; such films were shown as added attractions after the stage performances. But the importance of such events was overshadowed, for the time being, by the eruption of outdoor cinema shows, in tents or in the open air.

### *Tent to palace*

The showman generally equipped himself with films for two or three programs. Having exhausted the possibilities in one location, he moved elsewhere. Showings in parks and empty lots of big cities soon led to showings in smaller cities and towns and eventually to the rural "traveling cinemas" still important in India.

Jamjetji Framji Madan (1856–1923), member of a Parsi family that had moved from Bombay to Calcutta, became interested in the theatre at an early age. Calcutta, as well as other of the larger Indian cities, was experiencing a rebirth of theatre. This had begun

<sup>18</sup> *Indian Documentary*, Vol. IV, Nos. 3–4 (1958).

<sup>19</sup> *Times of India*, December 26, 1898. Bardèche and Brasillach, in *History of Motion Pictures*, p. 9, have commented: "Quite a number of trains arrived and departed in the early films."

<sup>20</sup> Chakrabarty, "Bengal's Claim to Pioneership," *Dipali*, April 8, 1939.

during the 1830s and had slowly gained momentum, although only among educated strata of Indian society. Madan started as prop boy at Calcutta's Corinthian Hall, later toured other cities of India as an actor, and eventually purchased the company in which he had started. Madan, along with various relatives, was involved in innumerable enterprises. He was an importer of liquors, foods, and pharmaceutical products, and dealt in insurance and real estate. Throughout life he combined such activities successfully with his theatrical interests.

In 1902, having purchased film equipment from an agent of Pathé Frères, he launched a "bioscope" show in a tent on the Maidan, the green in the heart of Calcutta.<sup>21</sup> This was the beginning of what was to turn into a film production-distribution-exhibition empire, a powerful factor for three decades, not only in India but also in Burma and Ceylon.

Another film magnate of later years, the venturesome Abdulally Esoofally (1884–1957), likewise began as a tent showman. From 1901 to 1907 he moved throughout southeast Asia, holding "bioscope" showings in Singapore, Sumatra, Java, Burma, Ceylon; from 1908 to 1914 he continued his cinema travels in India. His tent was 100 feet long and 50 feet wide, propped by four posts, and could hold a thousand people. The short items shown were purchased outright by Esoofally, according to the practice of the time, and were used till the prints wore out.

I had to buy these bits at the rate of 6d. per foot and 40 or 50 pictures composed my full programme. The films, however small, provided a varied fare. They included comedy gags, operas, travel films, sports events, etc. The maximum length of those films ranged between 100 and 200 feet and only in 1908 I remember to have shown my biggest films—1,000 feet in length—in my traveling cinema. When I started my bioscope shows in Singapore in 1901, little documentary films I got from London helped me a lot in attracting people. A short documentary about Queen Victoria's funeral and another about the Boer War showing the British Commander-in-Chief Lord Roberts' triumphant entry into Pretoria against the forces of Paul Kruger, the President of the Transvaal Republic, proved wonderful draws. People

<sup>21</sup> The date is variously given. J. J. Madan, as managing director of Madan Theatres Ltd., gave 1902 as the starting date of Madan film enterprises, in testimony before a government inquiry in 1927. *Evidence*, II, 829.

who had merely heard or read some vague reports about the war were thrilled beyond description when they saw the famous figures of the Boer War in action.<sup>22</sup>

In 1914 Esoofally finally settled down by taking over, with a partner, the Alexandra Theatre in Bombay; in 1918 they built the Majestic Theatre, where they were later to premiere the first Indian talking feature.

The imported films shown by early traveling showmen came from many countries, but American and French films might come to them via London distributors. Many were well worn before being dumped on the Asian market. Worn prints remained, for decades, a problem plaguing Asian exhibitors.

Throughout the early years the length of imported films grew rapidly. In the catalogues of one English producer, distributor, and equipment manufacturer, James Williamson, films averaged 60–75 feet in length in 1899 but ran to 280 feet in 1902.<sup>23</sup> As films lengthened they acquired, or aimed at, more substantial content. A “grand cinematographic programme” at Bombay’s Gaiety Theatre in the 1901 Christmas season offered *Life of Christ*, “showing Birth, Miracles, Trial, Sufferings, Crucifixion, Burial, Resurrection, and Ascension.” It also included, in what must surely have been one of the least merry of holiday programs, *The Queen’s Funeral Procession* and *Assassination of President McKinley*.<sup>24</sup>

During the following years Europe and America experienced an increase in productions based on literary classics. The era of the pretentious Film d’Art, often featuring stage stars, began in 1907. For several years products of this sort dominated European and American cinemas and also the cinemas establishing themselves on a permanent basis in the big cities of India. In Calcutta J. F. Madan built the Elphinstone Picture Palace, the first of many Madan film theatres, in 1907. During the 1910s he expanded steadily and by the end of the decade had thirty-seven theatres.<sup>25</sup> In Bombay, after 1910,

<sup>22</sup> “Half a Century in Exhibition Line: Shri Abdulla Recalls Bioscope Days,” in *Indian Talkie*, 1931–56, pp. 121–22.

<sup>23</sup> Low and Manvell, *History of the British Film, 1896–1906*, p. 45.

<sup>24</sup> *Times of India*, December 23, 1901.

<sup>25</sup> *Evidence*, II, 844.

the rivalry among film theatres, as reflected in the growing size and fulsomeness of newspaper advertisements, grew intense.

Along with the stagy dramas, comics were now a booming attraction and would soon emerge from anonymity into stardom. A week in September, 1912, found the Imperial Cinema in Bombay showing *The God of the Sun* along with various Pathé items and "two screaming comics." The Alexandra Theatre had a two-hour show including five "ripping comics." The America-India, apparently the first theatre to install electric fans, offered *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, *The Dance of Shiva*, and "three real good bits of fun." The Excelsior had an all-French program, while the Gaiety, "the Rendez-vous of the Elite of Bombay," was announcing a season of "London's latest successes by the Ambrosio, Lubin, Vitagraph, American Bioscope, Nordisk, Urban, Pathé and other film companies."<sup>26</sup>

Clearly the film scene in India, as in other countries, was at this time extremely international. France, headed by Pathé, was apparently the leading source, but products of the United States, Italy, England, Denmark, and Germany also competed for a share of the Indian market. To this complex struggle a new element was about to be added, and it came from a totally unexpected source.

### *Enter a shastri*

Dhundiraj Govind Phalke, more generally known as Dadasaheb Phalke, was born of a priestly family at Trimbkeshwar, in the district of Nasik not far from Bombay, in 1870. Committed by birth to be a shastri, a learned man, he was trained for a career as Sanskrit scholar, in emulation of his father. But he early showed a feverish interest in painting, play acting, and magic. The family moved to Bombay when the father joined the teaching staff of Elphinstone College, and this made it possible for young Phalke, at the completion of high school, to study at the Sir J. J. School of Art, a large institution in Bombay. Here he received a grounding in various arts including photography. He had also, by now, become a skilled magician, which talent he later put to professional use. After further

<sup>26</sup> *Times of India*, September 14, 1912.

art training at the Kala Bhavan<sup>27</sup> in Baroda and a period as photographer for the governmental Archaeological Department, he was offered backing to start an Art Printing Press. He now settled down, to all appearances, to a life of fine printing. He was married, and raising a family.

His backers, to acquaint him with the latest printing processes, especially in color work, arranged for him to take a trip to Germany. The arrangement provided that Phalke must remain with the company at least a stipulated time after the journey, which he did. But he already knew, when he returned, that a printing career would not satisfy him. About 1910 he fell ill and for a time lost his eyesight. On the return of his vision, he had an experience that determined the course of his life.

At a Christmas cinema show he saw a *Life of Christ*. Before he got home, a determination had formed in him. He asked his wife to go with him to the next showing. Family tradition has it that there was no cash in the house, and money had to be borrowed from neighbors for transportation and cinema tickets. Meanwhile Phalke explained what was on his mind. He now knew what he must do with his life.<sup>28</sup>

As he had watched *Life of Christ* he had been thinking about the possibilities of a film on Lord Krishna, most beloved of Hindu deities. The rescue of the infant Krishna from deadly perils, the pranks of his boyhood, his many romantic involvements, his love of Radha, his later wisdom and exploits of valor, were already taking cinema form in the mind of Dadasaheb Phalke. Many currents of Phalke's life—priestly lineage, dramatic appetite, technical virtuosity—merged in this project. By the time the film show was over, his wife fully understood his plan and what it would involve, and she agreed. She became, in fact, a most important collaborator.

There were family councils, in which various relatives voiced disapproval. The recklessness of the plan, which involved giving up printing, appalled them. But in the end he went ahead. With help from some, and funds raised by mortgaging his life insurance, he engaged passage for England, to obtain equipment and guidance. He

<sup>27</sup> Now the art department of the University of Baroda.

<sup>28</sup> Interview, Neelakanth Phalke.

prepared for the trip by buying, at a Bombay bookstall, an *ABC of Cinematography*,<sup>29</sup> apparently the work of the British film pioneer Cecil Hepworth. In England Hepworth was one of the film makers visited by Phalke.

Early in 1912 Phalke returned to India with a Williamson camera, a Williamson perforator—film had to be perforated in the dark-room before use—developing and printing equipment, raw film for several months of work, and a collection of the latest film publications.

Phalke did not have enough funds for a major film so he began with an intermediate project—economical but at the same time expressive of his inquisitive spirit. He decided on a short film in time-lapse photography. In the Phalke home the precious camera, zealously guarded from the children by Mrs. Phalke—Saraswathi or “Kaki” Phalke—was mounted before a pot of earth. Dadasaheb Phalke worked out the mechanism for intermittent photography. Finally friends, including a prospective financier, were invited to see the result: a capsule history of the growth of a pea into a pea-laden plant. The audience was astounded, and Phalke got his financial backing.<sup>30</sup> His backer at this time was Nadkarni, Bombay dealer in photographic goods.<sup>31</sup>

Still postponing the crucial Krishna project, Phalke now decided on a slightly easier topic, likewise based on Indian mythology and judged by Phalke to have powerful appeal. The story was that of Harischandra, a king so devoted to truth and duty that for their sake he sacrificed everything including wealth, kingdom, wife, and child—but was rewarded in the end for his steadfastness. The story, from the *Mahabharata*, was known to every Indian via uncounted centuries of oral tradition.

The difficulties facing Dadasaheb Phalke must have seemed, at times, insuperable. Although theatre and its sister art, the dance, were supposed by the Hindus to have originated with the gods—Brahma himself had ordered the first dramatic performance—and

<sup>29</sup> Interview, Neelakanth Phalke.

<sup>30</sup> Suresh Phalke, “The Film Industry and Phalke,” *Hindustan Standard*, February 24, 1961.

<sup>31</sup> Interview, Neelakanth Phalke.



MRINALINI PHALKE AS THE BOY KRISHNA IN *Kaliya Mardan* (SLAYING OF THE SERPENT), 1919. HINDUSTAN FILM COMPANY

Fragments of a number of Phalke films have been preserved and in 1956 a reel of the fragments was assembled by the Indian Motion Picture Producers Association. The over-all structure of each film is forever lost, but the fragments show a fine pictorial sense and remarkable technical resourcefulness. Like another magician who became a film pioneer, Georges Méliès, Phalke was a special-effects genius. He explored a vast range of techniques, including animation. He experimented with color, via tinting and toning.<sup>41</sup> He used scenic models for a number of sequences, including the burning of Lanka, for which he also burned down two full-sized sets. He took interest in every detail of laboratory work. Having determined the right timing for the printing of a sequence, he set a metronome going to guide his wife: she turned the handle of the printer in time

<sup>41</sup> Tinting involved frame-by-frame brushwork on the print. Toning was done in the developing bath; through one or another chemical, an entire sea sequence was given a blue color, a fire sequence a red color.

with the metronome. He was often at odds with backers because he poured time, energy, and money into technical experiments. Sometimes these diverted him from film production, as when he developed a soap formula and launched a small soap factory, losing money on the venture.<sup>42</sup>

Not all his experiments were technical. He persuaded a Maharashtrian woman, Kamala, to play the leading role in *Bhasmasur Mohini*, his second feature production. His own daughter Mrinalini played the boy Krishna in *Kaliya Mardan* (Slaying of the Serpent), produced in 1919. During the 1920s his company included a number of women. Thus, although fear of stigma remained for years a film industry problem in the casting of women's roles, Phalke took the first steps toward overcoming it.

In 1914 Phalke made a second trip to London, with his first three films. The proprietor of the *Bioscope* arranged a showing for a film industry group. The group must have been baffled by the content, so alien to its own preoccupations. But it apparently treated Phalke with considerable respect, and he was grateful for the attention he received.<sup>43</sup> The *Bioscope* expressed the opinion that "Mr. Phalke is directing his energies in the best and most profitable direction in specializing upon the presentation by film of Indian mythological drama."<sup>44</sup>

Although resembling Méliès in technical skill, Phalke was never interested in amazement for its own sake. The material of his features came from a mythology that had, for its audience, religious meaning. To people unfamiliar with this material the films unquestionably seemed naïve. To those raised on the tales of Hindu gods and heroes, they opened a world of wonder. They earmarked for the Indian film an area of subject matter that won for it an immediate and powerful hold in India and neighboring countries—and at the same time shut it off from others.

The mythological film was to dominate Indian production for some years, but rival genres would begin to compete for attention. In the 1920s the film of modern background, the "social," rose in importance, and the Indian "historical" had a beginning. At the

<sup>42</sup> Interview, Neelakanth Phalke.

<sup>43</sup> Evidence, III, 879.

<sup>44</sup> *Bioscope*, June 4, 1914, PUBLIC.

same time the "stunt film," inspired by the popular serials and by the features of Douglas Fairbanks, became an obsession with Indian producers. During this decade Phalke gradually began to feel like a stranger in the film world.

*Rajah Harischandra*, produced under the banner of Phalke's Films, was launched on a capital of Rs. 15,000.<sup>45</sup> Its success apparently made possible the subsequent productions of Phalke's Films, including several features and numerous "topicals" and scenic films. As the company grew and its expenses rose, as new equipment was needed, and as Phalke's production ambitions grew, more capital was required. About 1917 five new partners, including Mayashanker Mulshanker Bhatt, a textile manufacturer,<sup>46</sup> entered the picture and the company was reorganized as Hindustan Film Company. Phalke soon quarreled with the new partners and for two years, 1920-21, retired to Banaras. He then returned to Nasik, the quarrel was resolved, and production resumed. But film tastes were changing rapidly, and increasing costs put a premium on rapid and steady production. In 1927 Phalke retired from the Hindustan Film Company. The following year he told a government committee: "I have retired, being disgusted with it—I do not care so much for money. I care more for technicality and first class production. I could not succeed so I left it off."<sup>47</sup>

In 1931 he tried again. Backed once more by Mayashanker Bhatt, he produced *Setu Bandhan* (Bridge across the Sea). Coming at the last moment of the silent era, it was ill-timed. Phalke tried to salvage it by postsynchronizing dialogue, the first such effort in India. Then he made a talkie, *Gangavataren* (The Descent of Ganga), for another company. But the tide was no longer with him. Phalke lived until 1944. When he died at Nasik, on February 16 of that year, he was almost forgotten, and a pauper. During his final months all memory of his days of fame left him.

Phalke had laid the cornerstone of an industry. The Indian film world measures its existence from the release of *Rajah Harischandra*, India's first feature, in 1913. That film—the spell it cast, the crowds it drew—persuaded many a tent showman, many a cinema-

<sup>45</sup> *Evidence*, III, 878.

<sup>46</sup> *Indian Cinematograph Year Book*, 1938.

<sup>47</sup> *Evidence*, III, 883.

PHOTOS  
THAT LAUNCHED  
A CAREER



FROM GANGULY'S BOOK *Bhaber Abhibaktae* (EXPERIMENTS IN EXPRESSION), 1915





FROM GANGULY'S SEQUEL, *Amar Desh* (MY COUNTRY), CA. 1920

ALL CHARACTERS BY GANGULY

tographer of topical, many a backer, to take a fling at the feature film. Within a few years film production broke out like a rash in many parts of India.

## *Three Get Started*

Dhiren Ganguly—sometimes known by a longer version of his name, Dharendra Nath Gangopadhyaya—was born in 1893 in Calcutta. He studied at the University of Calcutta, then went to nearby Santiniketan to pursue art studies under its already famous founder, Rabindranath Tagore, whose spirit found expression in poetry, story, drama, essay, music, dance, and painting. From these studies Ganguly went to a position in Hyderabad, in the heart of the In-

dian subcontinent, at an art college sponsored by the Nizam of Hyderabad, one of the most powerful of Indian princes. Heir of a long line of Nizams that went back two hundred years, this potentate was virtually all-powerful in the vast area under his control. A Muslim, he ruled over a population of 16 million, of whom about 13 million were Hindus. He was often referred to as the richest man in the world and the size of his harem was a subject of rumor and legend. Under the existing relationship with the British, the Nizam of Hyderabad, like the more than 500 other rulers of "princely states," recognized the "paramountcy" of the British, but this scarcely affected his internal authority. Often benevolently exercised, it was close to absolute.<sup>1</sup>

At the Nizam's art college Ganguly soon acquired the title of headmaster. But he had time for other projects. Interested in acting and photography, he published in 1915 a book of photographs, *Bhaber Abhibaktae* (Experiments in Expression), in which he himself appeared in a vast variety of roles: men and women of all ages and all segments of society. In some photographs he appeared in several guises. In one such photograph, for example, he was an orator on a soapbox and also each of the four people listening. The book provided an outlet for a rich satiric sense and was instantly popular, running to several editions and leading to additional volumes. *Bhaber Abhibaktae* was followed by *Amar Desh* (My Country) and two other sequels.<sup>2</sup>

Ganguly sent the first of these books to J. F. Madan in Calcutta, expressing interest in the new art of the motion picture. Madan immediately encouraged him to come to Calcutta for a talk. Madan by now owned all the theatres in Calcutta except one, the Russa, as well as theatres in a number of other cities. He was an importer of film equipment and films, which he distributed to his theatres and others. Along with film interests he also had a Calcutta theatrical company and was starting to produce films of various lengths based

<sup>1</sup> Wallbank, *A Short History*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>2</sup> Aside from launching a film career, these volumes led later to employment of Ganguly by the Calcutta Police Department to train detectives in the art of disguise. Decades later he was recalled to give similar instruction to the police of independent India. Interview, Ganguly.

on its productions. He was also making occasional topicals. When Ganguly came to see him about 1918, Madan was interested in Ganguly's acquaintance with Tagore, and encouraged him to get the poet's permission to make a film based on Tagore's play *Sacrifice*. Ganguly went to Tagore, who promptly gave his consent.

But the *Sacrifice* film was postponed by other developments. A Calcutta businessman, P. B. Dutt, who had made substantial profits from the manufacture of wooden buckets, wanted to invest in the film field. He suggested to N. C. Laharrie, of Madan's organization, that he leave Madan to form a new unit. Ganguly became a member of this group. Named the Indo-British Film Company, it consisted of four partners: Dutt as financier, Laharrie as general manager, J. C. Sircar as cameraman, and Ganguly as "dramatic director," which apparently included writing. Ganguly promptly wrote a story for them and by 1920 they were shooting it, with Ganguly playing the leading role. The film opened the following year in the one film theatre in Calcutta not owned by Madan, the Russa, where it was a resounding success. A zestful comedy, *England Returned*, it satirized the pretensions of Indians back from England, full of Western ideas; at the same time it satirized the conservatism of those Indians to whom all new ideas were unwelcome. Impartial in its laughter, it escaped the stigma of propaganda. Produced at a cost of Rs. 20,000, it earned more than this in its three-month run at the Russa. The Bombay rights were then sold to a Bombay theatre group for Rs. 22,000. J. F. Madan, ever the businessman, bought all remaining rights.<sup>3</sup> These profits put the partners into an exuberant state, so much so that within a year they parted company and went separate ways. Ganguly, by this time married to a distant relative of Rabindranath Tagore, returned to Hyderabad to head a new venture of his own, taking several Calcutta film technicians with him. The result was the Lotus Film Company, which began in 1922 under the benevolent eye of the Nizam.

The company set up its own laboratory and within a short time was also operating two Hyderabad cinemas. For the productions, the Nizam gave permission to use palace backgrounds.<sup>4</sup> The com-

<sup>3</sup> *Evidence*, II, 640-41.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 640.

pany got a rapid start and produced a number of films in quick succession. Some, like *England Returned*, were comedies and had English titles: *The Lady Teacher* and *The Marriage Tonic*. There was also a mythological, *Hara Gouri*. Another film, *The Stepmother*, was based on a Bengali play. Things were starting well for the Lotus Film Company.

In 1924 it offered, at one of its Hyderabad theatres, a Bombay-produced film called *Razia Begum*, based on historic events and telling of a Muslim queen who fell in love with a Hindu subject. The mid-1920s were a time of rising Hindu-Muslim tension. The makers of *Razia Begum* may have thought of their film as a contribution to interfaith amity. It had run successfully in Bombay, but immediately after its appearance in Hyderabad, a functionary of the Nizam arrived at the Lotus Film Company door. Ganguly and associates were instructed to leave the Nizam's domain within twenty-four hours.<sup>5</sup>

That day two theatres were closed, equipment was packed, and families and technicians departed. After stopping briefly in Bombay, Ganguly made his way back to Calcutta. Shipwrecked for the moment, he began, after a time, to try to organize a new venture. We shall leave him now but shall meet him again presently. He had already injected a new note of comedy into the Indian film, and burned his fingers on history. He would not be the last.

#### *A stall in a bazaar*

Debaki Kumar Bose, son of an attorney, was born in Akalpoush, in the Burdwan district of West Bengal—not far from Calcutta—in 1898. In 1920 he was busy with college studies and would soon take the University of Calcutta examinations that would make him a Bachelor of Arts. But 1920 was also the year that the Indian National Congress met in special session in Calcutta.

The most important figure at the meeting was Gandhi. Already a revered leader, he was now emerging as a great unifying force in the independence movement. Throughout the First World War he had cooperated with the British and urged faith in British assur-

<sup>5</sup> Interview, Ganguly.

tinue for decades, and which would bring into the Indian film a special Indian note of dedication and fervor. Debaki Bose was a devotee, a Vaishnavite, who could speak freely about the film medium and what it could do in the cause of love, in a way that film makers of other nations would not be likely to do. Love, said Debaki Bose, begets love. Only love, he said, can "bring about fruition in all human efforts, including the making of films."<sup>7</sup> The sound film, especially through its resources of music, was to give him the opportunity to emerge as one of India's most notable directors, although in the end he despaired of the drift of his industry.

We shall hear more of Debaki Bose.

### *A film for Idd*

Chandulal J. Shah was born in 1898 in Jamnagar, near Bombay. He studied at Suydenham College in Bombay and prepared for a career in business. After graduation, while looking for a position, he worked with a brother, D. J. Shah, who had written mythological films for several rising Bombay producers.

It was a time of tension and hunger but also of enterprise. The First World War had stimulated Indian business and industry. Before the war British policy had generally discouraged Indian industrialization; the function of India, in the colonial plan, had been to serve as a source of raw materials and a market for British manufactured goods. Although an Indian steel industry had been launched in the prewar years by the Tata family, its existence was regarded as precarious because of the possible hostility of Sheffield interests. But the First World War brought a change. The strain on British manufacturing made it desperately important to Great Britain that Indian industrialization be speeded. An Indian Munitions Board was set up in 1917 to make India, in large measure, "the arsenal for the Allies in the Near East."<sup>8</sup> India became an expanding source of steel rails, clothing, boots, tents, jute goods. The Board furthered expansion of wolfram mines, iron and steel works, cotton and jute mills. All this brought economic expansion to various areas, and

<sup>7</sup> Bose, "Films Must Mirror Life," in *Indian Talkie*, 1931-56, p. 43.

<sup>8</sup> Wallbank, *A Short History*, p. 124.

especially to the huge port of Bombay. Along with the officially sponsored growth there was other expansion. Wartime shortages brought speculation and black market trading, and these too put money into circulation in the big cities. All this had an impact on the infant film field, as similar conditions in the Second World War were to have years later, in even larger measure.

Funds came into film from a variety of sources. Hindustan Films, as we have seen, was made possible by a textile manufacturer, along with others. Jagadish, another new company of this period, was financed by a cotton merchant. In Calcutta an Eastern Film Syndicate was launched with the aid of a hair oil manufacturer.<sup>9</sup> In Bombay similar investments were creating other companies. In the words of one producer, the successes of Phalke "gave impetus to many capitalists in Bombay to rush to this industry."<sup>10</sup> Among the Bombay investors were the owners of theatres, who were by now competing vigorously for new films, especially the better Indian films. This trend is illustrated by the career of Chandulal J. Shah.

In 1924 Shah got a job on the Bombay Stock Exchange and felt he had settled down to a life of business. But the following year he heard that the Imperial Theatre was desperate for a film to be launched the week of Idd. For this Indian holiday, somewhat more than a month away, the theatre wanted an Indian film and had so far failed to obtain one. Chandulal Shah, silently aided by the reputation of his brother and his own vague association with several of his brother's mythological films, offered to have a film ready before the deadline. The theatre agreed to advance Rs. 10,000, half the usual budget for a 6,000-foot Bombay feature of the time. Within a day or two photography was begun, with Shah directing. When the theatre made enquiries two weeks later, he gave assurance that the film would be ready for the holiday. It was now that the theatre manager learned, to his horror, that Shah was not producing a mythological but a story of modern background. "I need a mythological!" he pleaded. "Something that will run at least a month!" A modern Indian story, he was sure, could not last more than two weeks. But it was too late to start over. Shah delivered the film be-

\* *Evidence*, II, 691.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 678.

Secunderabad, Nagercoil. In listing vanished companies, the editor sometimes added cryptic explanations or comments. For Bombay he listed Oriental Pictures Corporation ("Had a short life"), Young India Film Company ("One picture and then died"), Jagadish Films ("Defunct"), Excelsior Company ("Shut down"), Suresh Film Company ("Liquidated").

In Calcutta he listed the Indo-British Film Company ("Broke up"), Taj Mahal Film Company ("Short-lived"), Photo-Play Syndicate of India ("Flashed like a lightning and as quickly disappeared after their first picture, *Soul of a Slave*"), Eastern Film Syndicate ("Low moral tone stood in the way of their second picture, *Bicharack*, released after cuts—collapsed"), British Dominion Films ("Collapsed due to internal troubles"), Heera Film Company ("Not now functioning").

As to Madras, the list told of Nataraja Mudaliar ("Made a bold stand about a year or so producing mythological films. . . . His pictures were bad from all standpoints"), Star of the East Films ("Wound up owing to lack of capital"), Guarantee Film Company ("Guaranteed pictures no doubt but strange she did not guarantee her life"), General Pictures Corporation Ltd. ("Liquidated"), Associated Films Ltd. ("Failed for want of business-like instinct").<sup>13</sup>

Many of these enterprises had started with only the sketchiest technical preparation. A few had started on the basis of correspondence courses given by one or another "institute" in the United States.<sup>14</sup> Some started on the basis of one man's travel and observation abroad. In 1921 one young Indian, in London, sought permission to watch production at one of the studios and had been asked to pay a "premium" of £1,000, which he could not afford. He went to Germany and secured the same privilege for a more modest £15 per month. "The only training I got there was I saw how some of the well-known experts were directing and how things were carried out."<sup>15</sup> One man had traveled to the United States in the hope of making such observation but gained entry, after long effort, only by becoming an extra. And on the basis of another man's camera experience in the United States, a Bombay company was formed and

<sup>13</sup> *Who Is Who in Indian Filmland*, pp. 4-11.

<sup>14</sup> *Evidence*, III, 327, 364.      <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 181.

began production, "when unfortunately he died and the company had to go into liquidation."<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, enterprises were launched. It is not surprising that various observers were saying, during the 1920s, that Indian films were becoming worse, not better. It is also not surprising that by the end of the 1920s, capital was becoming scarce.

Among exhibitors, too, there was mushroom growth and high mortality. The number of theatres in India increased from about 150 in 1923 to about 265 in 1927.<sup>17</sup> This brought a sharply increased demand for Indian films, but the supply of usable films could not meet it. As for foreign films, an obstacle was Madan Theatres Ltd. By 1927 its chain numbered 85 theatres—65 owned and 20 supplied under contract.<sup>18</sup> Such a chain of theatres could and did outbid all other exhibitors for the best foreign films. Exhibitors were often faced with nightmare uncertainties about film supply, and sometimes took foreign films they did not want.

This reminds us that the Indian films of the 1920s were only a part of what the Indian filmgoer was seeing. In the other part, the foreign supply, an important change was taking place.

## *Empire*

We have noted that when Phalke began his work, in the years before the First World War, Indian cinemas were showing an international assortment of films. This was true also of theatres in Great Britain, the United States, and other countries. In 1910 the features released in Great Britain included 36 from France, 28 from the United States, 17 from Italy, 15 from Great Britain, 4 from Denmark, Germany, and elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> The films shipped to India before the war, and during its first year or so, reflected this pattern. Then the change came.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 13.

<sup>17</sup> *Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee*, p. 179.

<sup>18</sup> *Evidence*, II, 828. These figures include Madan theatres in Burma and Ceylon.

<sup>1</sup> Low, *History of the British Film, 1906–1914*, p. 54.

The outbreak of war in 1914 almost stopped film production in France and Italy, handcuffed English production with scarcities and restrictions, and isolated the German studios. But audiences everywhere remained ravenous for films, which were suddenly regarded as necessary for morale. American producers, now establishing themselves in Hollywood, were ready to fill the need. A fantastic American expansion began, which soon made Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, and other emerging stars household deities throughout the world, created fortunes, and set the stage for further expansion after the war. By the time the treaty of Versailles was signed Hollywood was the world film capital. Trench warfare was over. But the international film struggles were only beginning.

For the other film-producing nations, the problem was not only one of physical recovery. During the war the United States had set the pattern of film distribution. As early as 1915, Great Britain had portents of what this might mean. The Essanay company, controlling the most-wanted of all films, those of Charlie Chaplin, began to require British exhibitors to take the whole Essanay output along with Chaplin. British producers found British theatres booked far ahead by this "block booking" and increasingly unable—or unwilling—to absorb the slim output of the British studios. A plan to require theatres to show a minimum quota of British films was first proposed in 1917 but failed of adoption. By the end of the war, in 1918, the British film industry "found the America stranglehold too strong to break."<sup>2</sup> By 1925 it was estimated that 95 percent of British screen time was occupied by American films.<sup>3</sup> In France, a similar situation prevailed.

If British, French, and other producers were finding it difficult to regain a toehold on their home grounds, they now found their former United States markets even more impenetrable. Here vast consolidations were taking place. In some cases theatre chains, such as Loew's, were purchasing studios in order to be certain of a steady flow of films. In other cases producers, like Paramount, launched theatre-buying and theatre-building programs in order to have a secure home market. Paramount, starting such a program in 1919,

<sup>2</sup> Balcon et al., *Twenty Years of British Film*, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Low, *History of the British Film, 1914-1918*, pp. 65-66.

had 300 theatres by 1921 and almost a thousand a decade later.<sup>4</sup> Fox and Warner Brothers also bought American theatres by the hundreds; Universal followed the example on a more modest scale. Many theatres not purchased came under the control of the producers via block-booking contracts. Opportunities for foreign films became severely restricted. But the large American producers were now secure in their home base, and amply supported by it. Foreign markets came to represent pure profit.

In India this meant that American films could always be offered at lower prices than most other films, including Indian films. An Indian film usually had to recoup Rs. 20,000 in its home market. The importer of an American film could usually purchase Indian distribution rights for a fraction of this. In 1927 an importer of some Columbia Pictures productions paid as little as Rs. 2,000 per feature for rights in India, Burma, and Ceylon,<sup>5</sup> although most prices were higher.

In 1916 Universal became the first of the American producing-distributing companies to establish an agency in India. By the mid-1920s it was offering Indian theatres 52 features, 52 comedies, 52 newsreels per year. Block booking seems to have been involved in some cases but not in others. Universal appears to have felt that the Indian market was worth nursing patiently, and it won among some exhibitors a reputation for humanity. One exhibitor, irate at the demands of film distributors, declared: "The noblest exception to this statement is the Universal Pictures Corporation, whose agent in Bombay and the several local managers are very considerate to the theatre owners."<sup>6</sup>

Pathé-India had been established in Bombay as early as 1907 as the concessionaire for the films of Pathé Frères.<sup>7</sup> Alex Hague, for over two decades manager and sole proprietor of Pathé-India, could also handle other products and became the Indian distributor of First National Pictures—later absorbed by Warner Brothers. Pathé-India became an importer of American more than of European features.

During the 1920s the products of some of the other American

<sup>4</sup> Conant, *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry*, pp. 25-26.

<sup>5</sup> Evidence, III, 435.      <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 384.      <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 503.

companies were imported by Madan Theatres Ltd. It appears to have purchased American films in wholesale lots to secure the outstanding big-name attractions. American films formed the staple of most Madan theatres. In 1923, on the death of J. F. Madan, control of Madan Theatres Ltd. passed to his five sons—B. J., F. J., J. J., P. J., and R. J. Madan. At that time 90 percent of Madan imports came from the United States, the remaining 10 percent from Great Britain, France, and Germany.<sup>8</sup>

In 1926–27 15 percent of the features released in India were Indian, 85 percent were foreign. Most of these were American.<sup>9</sup> The position of the foreign film in India was of course irksome to Indian producers. The dominance of American films among these imports was especially nettling to British producers.

In the postwar years Germany was the first country to strengthen the international position of its film industry through government action. Partly a continuation of its wartime mobilization of film, this action involved lavish government investments in studios and equipment, as well as production subsidies.<sup>10</sup> In the 1920s the German film underwent a dramatic rebirth, which had its impact in India in several German-Indian co-productions, starting in 1925 with *The Light of Asia*, which we shall discuss later.

In 1927 Great Britain at last moved to bolster its film industry. Its Cinematograph Films Act of 1927 was described as "an act to restrict blind booking and advance booking of cinema graph films, and to secure the renting and exhibition of a certain proportion of British films, and for purposes connected therewith." For British theatres the quota was to start at 5 percent and in a few years rise to 20 percent. Its purpose was achieved with remarkable speed. In 1926 Great Britain had produced only 26 feature films. Production rose to 128 in 1929, and to 153 in 1932.<sup>11</sup>

While making sure of a share of its home market, Great Britain was also thinking about its place in the film market of British India. On October 6, 1927, the Government of India announced the ap-

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 863.

<sup>9</sup> *Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee*, p. 188.

<sup>10</sup> Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, pp. 35–36.

<sup>11</sup> Balcon et al., *Twenty Years of British Films*, pp. 14–15.

pointment of a committee of enquiry, the Indian Cinematograph Committee.

*"Much harm was being done"*

The background of this action was summarized by the committee in these words:

Letters and articles have appeared from time to time in the British Press asseverating that much harm was being done in India by the widespread exhibition of Western films. We have seen several of these Press comments from 1923 onwards. The general trend of them is that, owing to difference of customs and outlook, Western films are misunderstood and tend to discredit Western civilization in the eyes of the masses in India. Such criticism was chiefly directed against "cheap American films." To give an example of this sort of criticism, a well-known Bishop intimately acquainted with India stated (as reported in the Press) in a speech at a conference in England in 1925: "The majority of the films, which are chiefly from America, are of sensational and daring murders, crimes, and divorces, and, on the whole, degrade the white women in the eyes of the Indians."<sup>12</sup>

In view of all this, the Indian Cinematograph Committee was instructed to study the adequacy of censorship as practiced in India and the need for stricter measures. And the committee had a further task:

At the same time the question has been raised by a resolution of the Imperial Conference of 1926 whether the various parts of the Empire could take any steps to encourage the exhibition of Empire films. As all Governments of the Empire have been invited to consider this question, it appeared to the Government of India that it would be appropriate that it should be examined by the proposed Committee. This extension of the scope of the Committee's enquiry would also enable it to address itself to a question which may have a far-reaching influence on the development of the cinematograph in India, namely, the possibility of encouraging the production and exhibition of Indian films.<sup>13</sup>

Great Britain's careful approach to this problem, and the delicate wording of the resolution, reflected the nature of the relationship that existed in 1927 between Great Britain and British India.

<sup>12</sup> Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. xii.

### *Dyarchy in action*

The reforms of 1921 had been put into effect in India despite the boycott of the Indian National Congress, and a certain amount of democratic machinery was now operating. In the provinces some departments had been "transferred" to Indian authority, and in various provinces British officials were working under Indian ministers. Meanwhile the franchise had been extended, and in one of the branches of the central legislature the majority of members were now chosen by the broadened electorate.

However, these democratic mechanisms were combined with others that left ultimate authority firmly in British hands. While some provincial departments had been "transferred," more crucial matters such as justice, police, and prisons were still "reserved." And both in the provinces and in the central government, the executive had not only absolute veto power over legislation but also independent legislative power. If the legislature failed to enact a law he considered necessary, the Governor-General—or, in the provinces, the British-appointed governor—could "certify" it as essential and so make it law.<sup>14</sup> These devices were the crux of Indian opposition to the reform plan. In the view of many Indian leaders this system of "dyarchy," as it was called, invited Indians to share responsibility without authority. Yet the machinery had been launched, and the British were at pains to emphasize its democratic aspects. •

The Indian Cinematograph Committee was entitled in the spirit of the times. It consisted of three British and three Indian members. One of the Indians, Diwan Bahadur T. Rangachariar, a prominent Madras lawyer, was the committee chairman. The arrangement gave Indian members a preponderant dignity without a majority. The committee would, of course, make no ultimate decisions; it would study and report. Through its enquiry, it was asked to lay the foundation for protection of "Empire films."

For British purposes the resolution was well worded. The phrase "Empire films" was elusive, but the committee was urged to consider it as including Indian as well as British films. There was a spirit of partnership about this.

<sup>14</sup> Wallbank, *A Short History*, pp. 148-52.

In stating the problem in terms of a Western threat to Indian ways, the resolution was of course echoing a favorite theme of the Congress, and especially of Gandhi himself. In a characteristic utterance Gandhi had declared: "India's salvation consists in unlearning what she has learned during the last fifty years. The railways, telegraphs, hospitals, lawyers, doctors and such-like have all to go."<sup>15</sup> The committee was now asked to consider whether "such-like" did not include "Western films . . . chiefly from America."

To arrive at its decision the committee set out to study all aspects of film production, distribution, and exhibition in India, public reaction to them, and the operation of governmental supervision. It thus launched a major investigation, in the course of which it held hearings in a dozen cities, traveled 9,400 miles, visited production companies and theatres, questioned 353 witnesses, studied 320 replies to the 4,325 questionnaires it had issued, and spent Rs. 193,900.

The committee thought it worth recording that its witnesses had included 114 Europeans, Anglo-Indians, and Americans, and 239 Indians. Of the Indians, 157 were Hindus and 82 non-Hindus; the latter included 38 Muslims, 25 Parsis, 16 Burmese, 2 Sikhs, and 1 Christian. The committee also noted that it had examined 35 ladies, of whom 16 were Europeans and 19 Indians. The witnesses included members of the film industry and nonindustry people.<sup>16</sup>

In May, 1928, the committee completed its report, which was followed by a Minute of Dissent by its three British members, and the chairman's reply to the dissent. The report was printed, as was a transcript of all open hearings. The resulting material—the one-volume *Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee* and four volumes of *Evidence*—forms a rich storehouse of information on the early Indian film.

Among the film-industry witnesses were Dadasaheb Phalke, Dhiren Ganguly, J. J. Madan, Alex Hague, Sulochana or Ruby Meyers, and other early film leaders not yet mentioned such as Himansu Rai, producer of *The Light of Asia*. Other witnesses included representatives of American companies, censorship officials, and Indian

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Nehru, *Toward Freedom*, p. 314.

<sup>16</sup> *Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee*, pp. 13-14.

exhibitors, including traveling exhibitors. The transcript provides many vivid word pictures of the Indian film world in action in its second decade.

### *In cities and mofussil*

The theatres, as mirrored in the testimony, ranged from those of the Madan chain, one of which was about to install a Wurlitzer pipe organ at a cost of Rs. 65,000, to primitive cinemas in mofussil—the rural areas. Most theatres apparently had two or more showings a day; one theatre gave twelve a day during melas.<sup>17</sup> We learn that prices were usually in three or more classes, often from 2 or 3 annas to 2 rupees. In cities the top price might be 3 rupees, for "box" or "sofa" seats. In the lesser cinemas the lowest price might be 1 anna, for "ground" seats. In an Assam theatre the 393 tickets sold for one performance were for 350 ground seats, 40 bench seats, 3 chair seats; this was a normal distribution.

The films often had subtitles in three or four languages. A print made for circulation in the north might have each subtitle in Hindi, Gujarati, and Urdu; in the south a print might have subtitles in Tamil, Telugu, and English. Witnesses tell us that at each subtitle a rumble swept over the theatre, as people who could read proclaimed the words for those who could not. A few theatres had official readers.

A. We have translators now.

Q. Have you? On the cinema?

A. Oh yes. There is a man always standing there and explaining the film. He is a very clever fellow. He knows all about the story. Then as soon as one scene is on, he explains the whole thing in Telugu because everybody can't read what is on the film. He stands there throughout; he is a lecturer.

Q. We were told that such a man is a nuisance.

A. Not at all. He is paid 50 rupees.<sup>18</sup>

In a Northwest Frontier Province theatre this person was called a "demonstrator."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Evidence, I, 110.      <sup>18</sup> Ibid., III, 251.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., IV, 102. Never idolized like the Japanese *benshi* described in Anderson and Richie, *The Japanese Film*, pp. 22-34 the Indian narrators largely disappeared with the coming of sound.

Some of the mofussil theatres were described by witnesses as being in a sorry state:

The lowest class of spectator has to squat on the ground and the benches and chairs in the other classes are in wretched condition and infested by bugs. There is no proper ventilation and most of the theatres are merely corrugated tin sheds. There is very little open space surrounding the theatre and no garden to please the eye and to attract the public.<sup>20</sup>

An exhibitor in Nagpur said his theatre had cost him Rs. 24,000. "The tin shed alone cost us 14,000 rupees. It is the biggest cinema in Nagpur."<sup>21</sup>

The city of Bombay had 20 cinemas, Calcutta 13, Madras 9, Delhi 6, Poona 6. A number of other cities had three or four.<sup>22</sup> Exhibitors testified to many problems with local authority: "The police, the custom, the postal, telegraph, municipal and a host of other people have to be admitted free to avoid trouble."<sup>23</sup>

Women filmgoers were scarce in the south and in mainly Muslim areas of the north but were increasingly evident in most cities. In Hindu areas mythologicals brought them out in numbers. During Western films, "when a kissing scene is shown the ladies turn their heads away."<sup>24</sup>

American films usually appeared in India eighteen months after release, although some came much sooner. The most popular film of the decade appears to have been *The Thief of Bagdad*, starring Douglas Fairbanks. Exhibitors almost never saw films before booking them. Distributors said this was not "blind booking" because the exhibitor was told the titles, and could get information from trade papers. Outright purchase of prints—pirated, in some cases—persisted among some traveling cinemas, but others were renting films at Rs. 50 per night.<sup>25</sup> A city theatre would pay a much larger "fixed hire" or there might be a percentage arrangement, if the exhibitor was trusted.

Many Indian producers made only three prints of a feature film, for distribution throughout India. Ten prints appeared to be the maximum. The import duty on raw film was a restraining factor.

Shortcomings of Indian films were often mentioned. But what

<sup>20</sup> Evidence, I, 564.      <sup>a</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 856.      <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, 351–65.  
<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, 90.      <sup>b</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 572.      <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 579.

emerged most unmistakably was the growing preference for Indian films in spite of these shortcomings. Even witnesses who did not share the preference conceded that this was clearly the trend.

Q. You mean that ordinary people—we won't call them illiterate, but not belonging to the middle class—you mean to say they do not go to these theatres where foreign films are shown? Is that what you mean by your answer?

A. Yes, they do not go. . . . Formerly they used to go and see fighting or any exciting films, or comic films.

Q. Now that the Indian films are produced, you think the attendance at foreign films of a social nature is falling?

A. Yes.<sup>26</sup>

Clearly the American serials of the early 1920s had made way, in many theatres, for Indian films. Some exhibitors wanted Indian films but could not get them or afford them.

Q. You find it difficult to get Indian films?

A. Yes, the rates are exorbitant.

Q. Have you ever taken Western films?

A. Yes, they are cheaper than Indian films, but they do not attract the same audience as in the case of Indian films.

Q. But you find it difficult to get Indian films.

A. There is a lot of competition.<sup>27</sup>

In 1918, in Bombay, only one theatre had specialized in Indian films. By 1927 more than half of the twenty theatres showed Indian films at least part of the time. Exhibitors catering especially to a European and Westernized clientele—there were nine such theatres in Bombay—generally felt it essential to stick to Western films. One such exhibitor had shifted for only one week to a Phalke film:

The type of people who like Indian pictures, their way of living is quite different and generally they are people who chew betel leaves . . . let me give you an example. I did show an Indian picture at my Western theatre, *Lanka Dahan*, and I made 18,000 rupees in one week. But it ruined my theatre altogether.

Q. You mean you had to disinfect the cinema?

A. I had to disinfect the hall and at the same time I had to convince my audience I had disinfected it. . . . Till that time I went on losing money.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 21.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 318.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 364.

The problems of Indian film producers were "luminated by many witnesses. Several film makers were producing, trying to produce, a schedule of a dozen productions a year. A 6-week production schedule was considered normal for a feature. Bombay considered Rs. 20,000 a proper feature budget, although a few films had cost much more. Some Calcutta and Madras producers felt that Rs. 10,000, or at most Rs. 15,000, was the practical limit. A Bombay company was paying actors from Rs. 30 to Rs. 1,000 per month. The 30-rupee salary was for "a coolie, a super, an extra"; average actors got Rs. 200-250 per month. A normal star salary was Rs. 600-800 but a few received more.<sup>29</sup> In Bombay producers were already beginning to consider Punjabis the most suitable physical specimens for film acting.<sup>30</sup> Stars were rapidly becoming idols. One woman star, Sultana, received baskets of fruit from distant admirers. In Calcutta a few ladies "of the better classes" had taken part in films—we shall meet some of them later—but some producers drew on women from the "prostitute and dancing-girl class," who had apparently lost their early reluctance toward the cinematograph. The committee, concerned about the well-being of the industry, pursued this matter at every stop:

Chairman. Do you think that the present conditions in your studio are satisfactory, sufficient to attract respectable actors and actresses?

A. Oh yes, we are catering for respectable actors and actresses.

Q. I mean what arrangements are made for housing them?

A. We keep the respectable characters in separate rooms and they are quite aloof from the others.<sup>31</sup>

Most production was being done by closely knit companies. Each had its own laboratory. Almost all shooting was done outdoors, but a few producers were building, or planning to build, glass-roofed studios. Indian production of topicals was declining, but Pathé Gazette and International Newsreel were shown in a number of theatres. The Madan organization was an occasional producer of topicals, as well as related items: "We have always got a set of cameramen and if we get any orders from Rajahs or Maharajahs to film any function, we can undertake that kind of work too."<sup>32</sup> An un-

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 182-83.      <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 13.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 165.      <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 851.

usual, self-taught cameraman in Madras sent reels of film to Fox and International Newsreel in New York City and was paid \$2 per foot, undeveloped, for whatever was accepted. He told the committee he had sold 3,000 feet in a four-year period—mainly of festivals and parades.<sup>33</sup> But in general, activity of this sort was sporadic, and what there was of it was beginning to be watched with nervousness by the censors. A newsreel item showing a Sikh procession was banned by the Calcutta Commissioner of Police for fear it would offend Muslims.<sup>34</sup>

In the primitive laboratories maintained by various producers, conditions were often "appalling." Heat was the great enemy of technical standards. A laboratory man explained: "You have got to try and harden your film and it gets nothing but a mass of jelly on the celluloid and the least touch will scratch it. I have had the experience of it washing right off the celluloid."<sup>35</sup>

The relation between film industry and press received attention and produced interesting revelations. The committee noted that newspapers included "critiques" of foreign films more often than of Indian films. Wouldn't searching criticism help to raise the standards of Indian films? Answering this question, a Bombay editor explained:

If I may frankly confess to you, all newspapers get critique paragraphs typewritten from the exhibitors themselves. That is my frank confession.

Q. In the case of foreign films they get it from the foreign producers, ready made?

A. Ready made, cut and dry, only to be sent down to the printer.

Later he was asked:

Q. Supposing you criticise a picture honestly?

A. Our trade is so closely interwoven with the interests of the producers and exhibitors that we cannot possibly think of doing so.<sup>36</sup>

A Calcutta journalist told a similar story, while at the same time paying tribute to the *Statesman* for a degree of independence that was apparently remarkable:

What takes place usually is that for ordinary films the press do not even

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 728.      <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 1070-71.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 728.      <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 495-97.

care to send down a representative. Indeed the reviews which appear sometimes are sent in by the exhibitor. The *Statesman* is about the only paper that cuts it down. The other papers having more space, sometimes it appears as it is sent in.

Q. The advertising revenue does not tie their hands?

A. It does in a way for small papers. But the *Statesman* does not care a jot. Sometimes when Madans have taken a full page they have only received three lines. They have kicked up a row.<sup>37</sup>

### *Kissing, communalism, motor car dacoity*

At each stop in the committee's travels, the workings of censorship received major attention. Under legislation of 1918—the Indian Cinematograph Act—and amendments of 1919 and 1920 the control of cinemas and the censorship of films had been made provincial “reserved” subjects, and placed under police jurisdiction. In Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras, boards of censors had been set up in 1920 to assist the Commissioner of Police in this censorship. A Punjab board had been organized in 1927. Each of these boards could license a film for showing throughout India and also, at any time, “uncertify” it. A film could also be uncertified at any time for any city by its Police Commissioner or for any province by provincial authority.<sup>38</sup> Thus *Orphans of the Storm*, with the Gish sisters, was uncertified in various areas when police found Indian audiences too responsive to the revolutionary scenes; *Razia Begum*, the Indian film about a Hindu-Muslim palace romance—which had angered the Nizam of Hyderabad—was uncertified in various areas after Muslim protests.<sup>39</sup>

The make-up of the boards, and their procedure, reflected prevailing tensions and ways of coping with them. The Calcutta board, for example, had a Hindu member, a Muslim member, a British military member, a British woman member, and others—each representing, in effect, a constituency. British members had a majority. The president, as in the case of each of these boards, was the Commissioner of Police, who was British. In practice, the work of the

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 1080–81.

<sup>38</sup> *Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee*, pp. 105–9.

<sup>39</sup> *Evidence*, IV, 368–98.

board was largely done by two paid inspectors, one British and one Indian. Every film was seen by an inspector. The board generally certified a film on the basis of his recommendation. If he foresaw possible difficulties, the secretary of the board asked one or two of its members to have a look at the film. This was not done in rotation.

For instance, if the film is such as is likely to be objected to as being offensive to Mohammedans he would naturally put the Mohammedan member to report on it. If it is a film which is likely to be objected to from the point of view of the military, he would put the military representative on it. In the case of a film which is likely to affect women or children the lady representative would be on it.<sup>40</sup>

All this was in accord with accepted practice. It seemed, no doubt, an essential procedure for avoiding trouble on tense issues. At the same time, it had the effect of giving the issues a built-in status. Each board member acquired authority only from the specialized sensitivities he was expected to have. He tended to become a prisoner of his constituency. A group looked to its representative on the board to veto the objectionable. The Muslim board member was thus constantly faced with the choice of either approving a film or defending it thenceforth against the objections of the most sensitive Muslims. The military member, the woman member, the Hindu member—each was placed in a similar position.<sup>41</sup>

The witnesses who appeared before the Indian Cinematograph Committee, and who represented various fields of interest, overwhelmingly favored strong censorship for India. Even people who said they generally disapproved of censorship maintained that it was essential for India. The feeling that India represented a special problem in this respect was, however, explained on widely varying grounds. Some said it was essential because of Hindu-Muslim friction. A member of the Punjab board was asked:

Q. Of course in this province history requires very careful handling?  
A. Oh yes.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 1045.

<sup>41</sup> A college professor on the Calcutta board, not representing an especially touchy constituency, said: "My services were requisitioned not more than half a dozen times in two years." *Ibid.*

**Q. Modern history will perhaps have to be avoided?**

**A. It will have to be for the present.**

**Q. With the present communal tension?**

**A. If you want Indian history more modern than 1,000 A.D., it would be difficult to handle the subject.<sup>42</sup>**

Others considered censorship essential because, they said, foreign films were encouraging crime in India. A recent rise in robberies involving cars—"motor car dacoity"—was mentioned by several witnesses. All considered these robberies to be due to the cinematograph, although the chairman of the committee at one point suggested that they might also be due "to the advent of the motor car."<sup>43</sup>

Still other people considered censorship essential in India because the hugging and kissing in foreign films were "demoralizing" Indian youth and threatening Indian custom and tradition. Many witnesses favored the strictest censorship of love scenes. Complete elimination of all kissing sequences was recommended by some. One witness felt it would be enough to eliminate close-ups. "Avoid close-ups as much as possible. That is the main thing."<sup>44</sup>

Finally there was the view, held by European witnesses especially, that films were bringing Western society into contempt and undermining Indian respect for Western women.

While the need for censorship was thus asserted on various grounds, political necessity was almost never mentioned among them. Yet when instances of censorship were examined, political reasons loomed large. While the other arguments for censorship were advanced earnestly and with evident sincerity, it is notable that all these arguments, coming from Indians and non-Indians alike, laid the basis for a strict political censorship.

The paid inspectors, before recommending a license, often required the producer or distributor to make specific cuts or changes. The cuts often had to do with subtitles. The committee was curious about a number of these cuts, which represented a variety of problems. Calcutta's British inspector, who considered Kalidasa a writer of books rather than of plays, was asked to explain a cut in an imported film:

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 2.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 80.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 925.

Q. Again look at No. 8070, *The Impossible Mrs. Bellew*. In your remarks you say, "Omit the subtitle, 'Madame, you are magnificent, your figure is fair as your face is beautiful.' " What is wrong with it?

A. It was a direct reference to some essential features of the lady.

Q. Don't you pay compliments to a lady?

A. I think it was somewhat an offensive remark to make.

Q. Sometimes they are flattered too. For instance, our Kalidasa has put in some such words to Dushyanta in addressing Shakuntala?

A. But I would not draw an exact parallel between a book and a picture on the screen. You would agree that a picture shown on the screen is much more striking and will appeal to a much wider audience than it can possibly do in the case of a book.<sup>45</sup>

The committee pried into a number of subtitle cuts made in Bombay and Calcutta, both in Indian and in foreign films. Many cuts involved political reasons. The extent and nature of them seemed to surprise some committee members.

Q. Then again in Reel VIII the words "in freedom" have been cut from the title. "My sons! Die in freedom rather than living in Shivaji's service." Why was it done?

Secretary of the Board: It was thought to have some political significance in it.

Q. Was it done by the Board or by the Inspector?

A. It was done by the Inspector with the concurrence of the producer.<sup>46</sup>

Q. Then again take 7640, page 33. *Bright Shawl*, where you say . . . "Omit the subtitle, 'And my poor brother's only sin was to love his native land.' " What is wrong with it?

A. It is impossible, I think, to judge these things apart from the context simply from the brief notes put down here.<sup>47</sup>

Q. You say further, "Omit the subtitle, 'To us of Royalty can anything be sweeter than the smell of a dead traitor?'" What is wrong with it?

A. That is a matter of opinion; we would not like to have it applied to our own Royal Family.<sup>48</sup>

Q. You say, "Omit the title, 'I have revised the civil list—increasing all our salaries by one-third, etc.'" I don't see anything wrong in it. Does this indicate the nervousness of people who benefited under the Lee concessions?

A. I don't see how you could draw any conclusions from these brief notes.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 556.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 101.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 555.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 573.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 573.

## Additional cuts and revisions that interested the committee:

*Fortune's Mask*. . . . Omit in Part I . . . "He is getting popular—have him investigated."<sup>50</sup>

Title . . . "Dreamed of a day when the government would be a government of the people, by the people, for the people" . . . ordered to be substituted by, "Dreamed of a day when peace and contentment would prevail in the land."<sup>51</sup>

For the subtitle, "We will hold a mass meeting in the square and force the President to declare peace or war," substitute, "We will hold a mass meeting in the square."<sup>52</sup>

For the subtitle, "But that is murder, they are our own people," substitute, "Must I obey your orders, sir?"<sup>53</sup>

Some committee members wondered about the effect of such interference on the producer and on the development of the motion picture. A producer was questioned about this:

Q. You are asked to omit, "Oh God, I have always been a man of peace. But the ways of peace seem to have gone wrong. Please guide me." . . . Do you think an English director or an American director would stand any such treatment?

A. Well, I think he would resent it.<sup>54</sup>

But most producers said little by way of protest. In fact, seldom during the weeks of hearings did any witness oppose censorship on principle. The record does contain one spirited statement of this sort, by A. Venkatarama Iyer, B.A., B.L., of Madurai:

I think every member of this committee believes in the freedom of speech and freedom of opinion. I believe that all must have read John Milton's *Aereopagitica*. I believe also that British citizenship is a thing founded upon liberty. I think that classical works are characteristically great because there is freedom of expression and boldness of conception. Fetters, even though they are made of gold, are still fetters. Censorship is cold, critical, routinelike, tyrannous, and inspires fear in the budding genius to express himself. The business of the censor is more to prohibit rather than appreciate a work of art. The very name savours of a sickening restriction, and it is the hand of death if it touches a work of art.<sup>55</sup>

But opposite views were urged with equal vigor:

Unduly interfere with the artistic and inspirational development? This is bosh! There is neither art nor inspiration in such pictures. They are gross and vulgar.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 1059.      <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 933.      <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 1060.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*      <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 191.      <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, 244.      <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 385.

### *A 50 percent majority*

In May of 1928 the committee submitted its report. As instructed, it made recommendations on (1) the adequacy of censorship and (2) imperial preference. On the matter of censorship it took a calm tone, expressing the opinion that Indian youth was not being demoralized and that many of the alarms about the impact of film in India were exaggerated. It emphasized that many of the expressions of alarm had originated outside the country, and suggested that they had come to a large extent from people motivated by their own special interests, and perhaps not fully in touch with the facts.

As to the adequacy of censorship, the committee expressed itself as satisfied. It gave cautious support to the view that "too much tenderness is bestowed on communal, racial, political and even colour considerations," and suggested that "over-much tenderness to frivolous objections is more likely to encourage dissension." However, it recognized that "the vast majority of witnesses . . . consider that censorship is certainly necessary in India," and it expressed its concurrence with this view. It suggested that a central board of censors could help to develop some uniformity in the standards of censorship, while still leaving a good deal of authority in local hands.

On the matter of "Empire films" the committee was forthright.

If too much exhibition of American films in the country is a danger to the national interest, too much exhibition of other Western films is as much a danger. . . . The British social drama is as much an enigma to the average Indian audience as the American. In fact very few Indians can distinguish American manners and customs from British manners and customs; very few Indians can distinguish an American, German, or Frenchman from an Englishman or Scotchman. If the cinema therefore has any influence on the habits, lives and outlook of the people all Western films are likely to have more or less the same kind of effect upon the people of this country.<sup>57</sup>

With these words the Indian Cinematograph Committee thrust aside the idea of imperial preference.

But it went further. It said the important thing was to nurture the Indian film. For this purpose it urged various measures, including a cinema department under the Indian Ministry of Commerce

<sup>57</sup> *Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee*, pp. 99-100

to look after the interests of the film industry, a government film library to utilize the educational value of film, a governmental film finance fund to aid producers with loans, and a government plan to encourage the building of cinemas.

The committee went still further, and recommended the abolition of all import duty on raw film. "That the raw material of an industry should be free of duty is almost axiomatic."<sup>58</sup>

The report included still another proposal, although it was at this point that the British members parted company with the Indian members and issued their Minute of Dissent. The additional proposal was a modified quota plan requiring Indian theatres, with some exceptions, to show a minimum proportion of *Indian* films. "That the best theatres in her own country should not be open to her own productions is a reproach which must be removed."<sup>59</sup>

While this proposal clearly echoed the spirit of the British quota plan of 1927, the British members now dissented. Their Minute of Dissent pointed out that, strictly speaking, the committee was evenly divided, 3-3, on this matter, and that even though the other group included the committee chairman, its proposal could not properly be called a majority recommendation, nor properly included in the report. It also frowned, to some extent, on the proposed financial support to Indian producers.

But all this hardly mattered, for the Government of India completely ignored the recommendations of the Indian Cinematograph Committee. Not one of them was enacted into law. This was perhaps not surprising, since the committee had rejected the very premises on which its existence had been based. However, some of its ideas would be revived in a later day, by a Film Enquiry Committee of independent India.

As to residual effects of the Indian Cinematograph Committee, a few may be suggested. Although the committee had expressed warnings about censorship, it had on the whole confirmed, and left undisturbed, a strict censorship system. Rigorous film censorship thus continued to be an Indian habit, a habit that would not readily be put aside by a government of independent India.

Now that imperial preference had been rejected for the world of

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.      <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

film, it was also clear that the dominance of American films among film imports would persist. The story of film in India would continue to be, for many years, a story of American and Indian films. And since an Indian quota and government assistance were likewise dead issues, the Indian film would have to make its way against its formidable rival without quota or subsidy.

The failure of the Government of India to respond to the recommendations of the Indian Cinematograph Committee may have had another reason besides that we have mentioned. The committee had been appointed on October 6, 1927. That was also the day on which *The Jazz Singer*, the world's first talking feature, had its premiere in New York City. Its reception signaled the end of an era.

Thus the film world which the committee studied so assiduously was already marked for sweeping changes. By the time the committee recommendations were written, detailed reports on *The Jazz Singer* and its impact on American audiences were appearing in Indian papers. Throughout 1928 the film trade press informed Indian producers of Hollywood's hectic scramble toward the new era. In 1929 *The Melody of Love*, a Universal Pictures production, became the first sound feature to be shown in India. Indian producers read, saw, heard—and knew that it was all inevitable. To many, it must have seemed like a pronouncement of doom.

## *Discord of Tongues*

The market of the Indian producer, up to this hour, had been an area inhabited by several hundred million people. Burma and Ceylon were being administered as part of India and within this area no barriers—political, economic, or linguistic—had barred the way to Indian films. Occasional successes had gone to Malaya, East Africa, South Africa. But now a film would apparently need a language.

In Bombay, which was leading in production volume, it meant this: Located in the Marathi-speaking area of the country, its producers would naturally make films in that language. If so, they would at the start of the 1930s have a potential market of 21 million

people, almost all in the region surrounding Bombay and including Poona, Kolhapur, and other cities.<sup>1</sup> But the films would be incomprehensible in the rest of India, in Burma, and in Ceylon.

In Calcutta, which stood second in production, it meant this: Situated in Bengal, its producers would naturally make films in the Bengali language, which would give them a market area inhabited by some 53 million, largely in the northeastern portion of India.<sup>2</sup> Again, the films would be incomprehensible in most other parts of India, in Burma, and in Ceylon.

In Madras, which had made a hesitant start in film production, it meant this: Situated in the Tamil-speaking area of the country, its producers would logically make films in that language, which would give them a potential market area of 20 million people in southern India and some additional millions in Ceylon, Malaya, and Africa. But the Tamil language, of Dravidian descent and unrelated to Marathi, Bengali, and other north Indian tongues, would make the films incomprehensible in most of India.

Would film producers, accustomed to visions of wide, growing markets, now be hemmed into linguistic pockets? Instead of competing in a large area, would they chop it into zones? And could an area of 20 million, or 21 million, or even 53 million inhabitants support a film industry, if costs should rise steeply in the era of sound?

Curiously, none of the major film centers was situated in the largest linguistic zone, comprising the 140 million Hindi-speaking people, mainly in north central India but with additional clusters in other parts. This Hindi market, in view of its size, would clearly be the most important; even so, films in Hindi would not be understood in vast areas, including most of the south.

Also curiously, no major film center was located among the 28 million people speaking Telugu, another of the Dravidian languages. Largely rural and including no metropolitan centers, this area had never generated film enterprise. But it would be an important market, that could not be well served by films in any language except Telugu.

If the large areas speaking Hindi, Bengali, Telugu, Tamil, and Marathi might conceivably support regional production, there

<sup>1</sup> Statistics in this passage are from Chatterji, *Languages and the Linguistic Problem*, p. 14.      <sup>2</sup> Including areas now in East Pakistan.

would still be the problem of smaller but by no means negligible language pockets: Punjabi, 15 million; Gujarati, 11 million; Kannada, 11 million; Malayalam, 9 million; Assamese, 2 million; Oriya, 2 million; Kashmiri, over 1 million; and others, including several million speaking primitive tribal tongues.

While films in Hindi would obviously acquire importance, this raised a further question: What kind of Hindi? For the Hindi-speaking area offered a linguistic chaos of its own, and had for centuries.

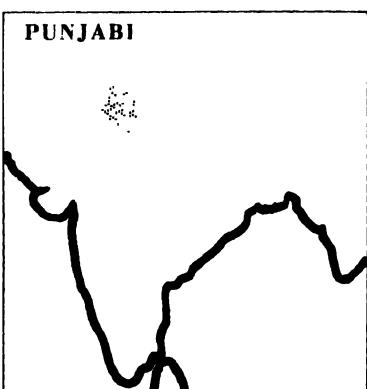
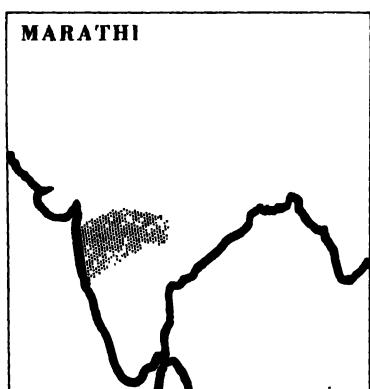
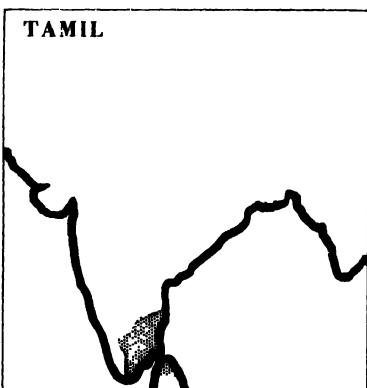
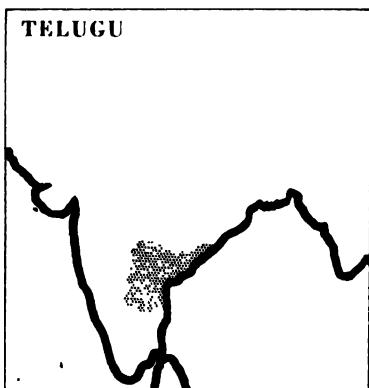
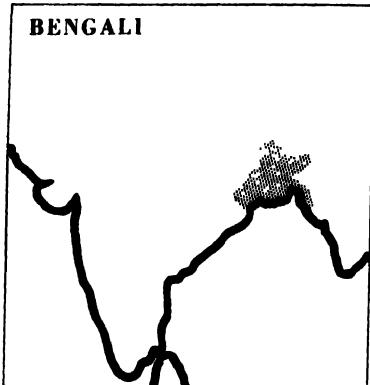
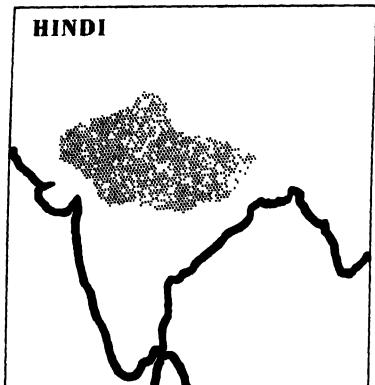
In ancient India, when Sanskrit was the language of courts, the common people already spoke a diversity of Prakrits, which tended to become more diverse. The huge, populous plains of the upper Ganges and Indus and their tributaries, comprising a dense mass of villages and towns, came to represent an extraordinary tangle of regional tongues. Gradually, as a means of communication within this area, a common "bazaar language" emerged during the middle ages, and Hindi was a development of this. In simplest form it is often called Hindustani, as the area that produced it was often called Hindustan.

As Hindi in the last century or so began to develop a literature, it tended to enrich its vocabulary by dipping back into Sanskrit, just as modern European languages coin new words on Latin stems. Thus literary Hindi, administrative Hindi, and, in recent years, radio Hindi have tended to be a Sanskritized Hindi.

Meanwhile the Muslims, having taken hold of the same medieval bazaar language, had amplified it with Persian words, producing a Persianized Hindi known as Urdu. It is the language of Muslims in many parts of India. Hyderabad in south central India, for example, has a substantial cluster speaking this Persianized Hindi.

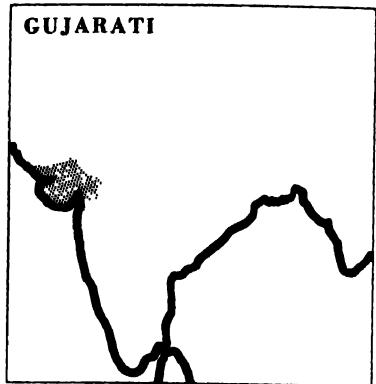
Thus the film producer was faced with a problem of practical and emotional dimensions: Sanskritized Hindi, Persianized Hindi, lowbrow Hindi—what kind of Hindi?

The dismaying problems facing Indian producers now threw into relief their good fortune of earlier years. It became clear how uniquely blessed they had been. India, along with its disruptive forces of language, religion, and caste, has had other forces making for unity, and it was these the silent film had been able to enlist—while evading the others.

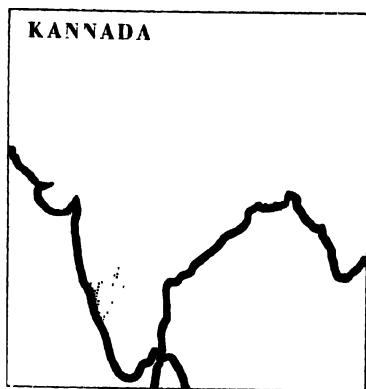


DISCORD OF TONGUES: INDIAN LANGUAGE AREAS

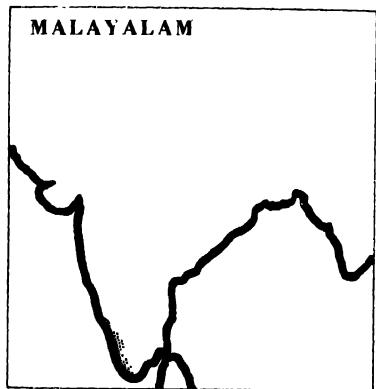
**GUJARATI**



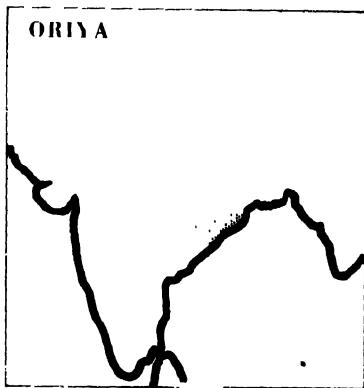
**KANNADA**



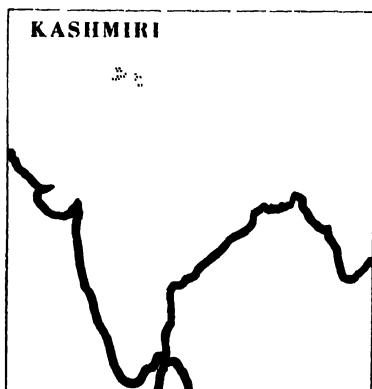
**MALAYALAM**



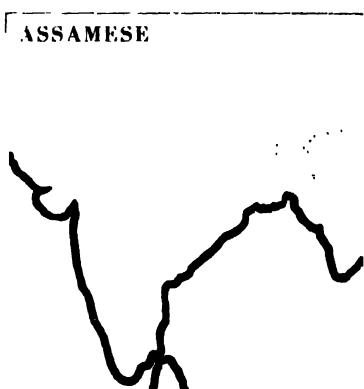
**ORIYA**



**KASHMIRI**



**ASSAMESE**



An Indian sense of community has been especially fostered by common cultural legacies, among the most remarkable of which have been the great Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Like the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, they are oversized tales of adventure involving gods, heroes, and mortal men, as well as mythical animals. Each has a unifying thread of plot, holding together a vast panorama of people and incidents. Like the Bible, each is also a compendium of folk history, poetry, and wisdom. Told, sung, and acted long before the Christian era, these tales have conquered the waves of invaders that have swept over and fragmented India. The stories found their way eventually, in varying versions, into all the languages of India, and also spread to other regions of South Asia such as Ceylon, Burma, Malaya, Sumatra, Java. Throughout this region, and even beyond it, the characters of the epics appear in song, dance, drama, painting, sculpture. This bond had magnificently served the silent film. But now, for the first time, disruptive forces would come to the fore.

The problems seemed so difficult that, at the first news of the advance of sound, a number of film production units quietly folded. Sound would mean investment in expensive equipment, to be imported at much risk. It would apparently call for a studio. A studio, if soundproofed, would require lighting equipment, seldom used heretofore in India. Sound and artificial lighting would require skills not yet available. Above all this would be the problem of uncertain and restricted markets. Many of the film units that had managed to survive in the silent era had neither resources nor knowledge with which to face the future. We have already mentioned some of those that now passed into oblivion: British Dominion Films, Eastern Film Syndicate, General Pictures Corporation, Associated Films, and others. But the climax of these events was totally unexpected. In 1931 Madan Theatres Ltd. began to come apart at the seams.

#### *Death of a giant*

If any company had seemed ready to face the new age, it was Madan Theatres Ltd. After the death of its founder, J. F. Madan, the company had undergone several shuffles at the top, but before

long J. J. Madan, third of the five Madan sons, had become managing director. Though disagreements between the brothers caused intermittent difficulties, J. J. Madan soon appeared to be giving effective leadership. Under his management the chain of theatres continued to expand. The company had owned or controlled 51 theatres in 1920; these grew to 85 in 1927 and to 126 in 1931.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout these years there were rumors that Madan Theatres would be sold to an American film company. These rumors, which caused anxious flurries in Indian film circles, had a basis in fact. J. J. Madan made a number of trips to Europe and America and on one of these he negotiated with Carl Laemmle, president of Universal Pictures Corporation. They agreed on sale terms, subject to approval by their respective companies. But when he returned to India, J. J. Madan found his brothers unwilling to approve the negotiated price.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps they thought it could be bettered by further negotiation, but the course of events wiped out any such possibility.

In December of 1927, during the investigations of the Indian Cinematograph Committee, J. J. Madan testified for two full days on behalf of Madan Theatres, and proved a forthright, winning spokesman.<sup>5</sup> He seems to have persuaded committee members that charges of monopoly practices, made by some witnesses against Madan Theatres Ltd., were "preposterous" and that the Madan organization was merely more experienced and alert than its competitors.<sup>6</sup> Soon after his testimony he journeyed again to the United States.

In New York he saw Al Jolson in *The Jazz Singer* and witnessed at firsthand its impact on filmgoers and the film industry. He found the American film world in a frenzy of retooling and reorganization. Hollywood was firing screen writers and commandeering Broadway playwrights. Long-established star contracts were being canceled and new talent wooed. A spirit of panic and plunge gripped many companies. J. J. Madan caught the fever, ordered sound production equipment, and headed back for India. In 1929 Madan Thea-

<sup>3</sup> The 1920 and 1927 figures are based on *Evidence*, II, 844-45; the 1931 figure on an interview with J. J. Madan.

<sup>4</sup> Interview, J. J. Madan.

<sup>5</sup> See his testimony and colloquy with committee members, *Evidence*, II, 835-90.

<sup>6</sup> *Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee*, pp. 43-45.

tres ushered in the talking picture in India by premiering, at the Elphinstone Picture Palace in Calcutta, Universal's *Melody of Love*. Meanwhile construction of a soundproof Madan studio had been started on the outskirts of Calcutta at Tollygunge—soon to be dubbed "Tollywood." An ambitious sound production schedule was planned.

But not everything went according to plan. That autumn brought the New York stock market crash, spectacular overture to a long, world-wide depression. Any lingering thoughts of a sale to Universal evaporated. Universal had other problems.

So did Madan Theatres. The studio was completed on schedule and the production plans launched. But their success would depend on the conversion of the chain of theatres to sound. The Madan brothers, involved in innumerable enterprises, many hinging on import and export, found their cash position threatened by the growing world paralysis. The conversion of the theatres began to loom as a major obstacle. And the theatres were reporting declining revenue.

In part this decline may have reflected an attendance drop. But in part it reflected something quite different. The Madan family began to receive evidence of a deeply disturbing problem. With the apparent collaboration of paid inspectors, attendance figures at a number of Madan theatres were being misreported by paid managers. At an apparently growing number of theatres, profits were being syphoned away. In a theatre empire as scattered as the Madan chain—over India, Burma, Ceylon—in areas so forbidding to efficient supervision, how could the company hope to defeat this threat?

As suddenly as J. F. Madan had plunged into tent "bioscope" showings in 1902 and launched picture palaces a few years later, J. J. Madan began to sell theatres in 1931. Once the decision was made, properties were disposed of in rapid order, largely one by one. In less than two years only one Madan theatre remained—the Regal in Calcutta. Presently the old theatrical company at the Corinthian, seriously foundering, was liquidated and the theatre converted to film. As the Opera Cinema, it brought the Madan cinema holdings back to two theatres.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Interview, J. J. Madan.

Meanwhile Madan Theatres had become the first Indian producing organization to release sound films. It made a number of short items and on March 14, 1931, put on a program of 31 such films. They included a hymn chanted in Sanskrit by "lady worshippers at the temple of Siva," a girls' school chorus singing a Tagore song, a dance by "the Corinthian girls," a scene from a Hindi (Urdu) play, a recitation from Kalidasa, a speech by Indian Nobel Prize physicist Sir C. V. Raman, and other items including a comic song.<sup>8</sup> On that same day a Bombay producer, the Imperial Film Company, became the first to release a sound feature—*Alam Ara* (Beauty of the World). A number of Madan feature films, some in Bengali and some in Hindi, followed this in rapid succession: eight Madan features were released in 1931, sixteen in 1932.<sup>9</sup> But the company deflation had not ended. The following year brought a slowdown in its production. The studio was offered for rent to other producers finally it was sold. Except for the two surviving cinemas, the Madan film empire passed out of existence.

Today its rise and fall are an almost forgotten story. Its main memorial is a street in the heart of Calcutta, renamed in honor of the founder of Madan Theatres Ltd. shortly after his death in 1923. The Bengal Motion Picture Association has its offices on Madan Street, in an old and rather rundown building, just upstairs from the Anti-Rowdy Section of the Calcutta Police Department.

#### *Sound statistics*

The disintegration of the one sizable organization in the Indian film world was ominous news. Even so, the sound era got started.

The statistical story of the Indian sound film in its earliest years may be briefly summarized. It was, in large part, a story of new units, in which individuals from older companies were brought together by new capital.

The Bombay producer who made the first talking feature, *Alam*

<sup>8</sup> *Filmland*, March 21, 1931.

<sup>9</sup> *Indian Talkie*, 1931-56, list, pp. i, xviii. In this list Hindi and Urdu films are both counted as "Hindi" films. Similarly, government statistics now lump Hindi, Urdu, and Hindustani together. We shall follow the same practice, using the term "Hindi."

*Ara*—in the Hindi language—was Ardeshir M. Irani. Born in 1885, he had started out in his family's musical instruments business, grown restless, gone into distribution of foreign films, and finally joined with tent showman Abdullaly Esoofally in buying the Alexandra Cinema in 1914 and building the Majestic Cinema four years later. Exhibition profits edged the partners into production. After involvement in several other companies they launched the Imperial Film Company in 1926,<sup>10</sup> and built a studio for it. In 1931 this company won the sound race among Bombay producers. The equipment Irani obtained from the United States was virtually "junk"<sup>11</sup> but somehow, via its single-system process,<sup>12</sup> he completed *Alam Ara*. The film has never been described as an artistic triumph and no one seems to have preserved even a fragment of it. But its impact was astonishing. The Majestic theatre was besieged. Tickets disappeared into the black market. "Police aid had to be summoned to control the crowds. . . . Four-anna tickets were quoted at Rs. 4 and Rs. 5."<sup>13</sup> Later, units went on tour with the film, taking sound projection equipment with them, and everywhere drew surging crowds.

That same year 22 other Hindi films appeared, and all seem to have made money. Also in 1931, three films in Bengali, one in Tamil, one in Telugu, appeared in their respective language areas. The year 1932 brought eight films in Marathi, two in Gujarati. In 1933, 75 Hindi features were made; production in other languages was also growing.<sup>14</sup> Film after film appears to have had a tumultuous reception. Virtually all the films appear to have earned back their cost. In the 1930s, as one producer recalls wistfully, "almost all films made money."<sup>15</sup>

By 1933 trepidation over the coming of sound had given way to unbounded optimism. That year the compiler of *Who Is Who in*

<sup>10</sup> *Indian Talkie, 1931–56*, p. 122.

<sup>11</sup> Interview, Irani.

<sup>12</sup> In this system, now used mainly for newsreels, sound goes directly onto the picture negative. In the more versatile double system, picture and sound are kept separate for flexibility in editing, to be combined in the laboratory as one of the final steps of the production process.

<sup>13</sup> "Half a Century in Exhibition Line," in *Indian Talkie, 1931–56*, p. 121.

<sup>14</sup> *Indian Talkie, 1931–56*, list, pp. i–xxvii.

<sup>15</sup> Interview, B. N. Reddi.

*Indian Filmland*, in a jubilant preface, gave expression to the mood:

What with scanty resources, stepmotherly Government aid, with keen competition from privileged foreign films, with few technically qualified men, with no interested capitalists, with less interested fans, with actors and actresses scarcely able to spell their name (for it was thought a disgrace by society people to be associated with the screen), with no market excepting India, with censuring censors, with discouragement to the right, cheap sneers to the left, despair in front, and criticism from behind, the Indian Film Industry, thank God, has marched on and on to the field of victory, battling against a thousand other misfortunes. Has she not made a giant stride?<sup>16</sup>

What had made possible this sudden reversal of fortune? How had such startling success been won?

Undoubtedly several factors had been at work. The status that had suddenly been conferred by film on the vernacular tongues, in a land in which foreign languages had for a thousand years dominated the councils and pleasures of the mighty, was a powerful influence. There was also the fact that sound had granted the Indian producer "natural protection." Though facing new problems, he now had markets which foreign competitors would find difficult to penetrate. The protection which the Government of India had declined to give him through a quota system had now been conferred by the coming of the spoken word. But along with these factors, an even more potent force had been at work.

*Alam Ara* included about a dozen songs. Another early Hindi film is said to have had about forty songs.<sup>17</sup> An early Tamil film is said to have had over sixty songs.<sup>18</sup> All the sound films produced in India in these early years had a profusion of songs. Most also had dances. Advertisements described some of these films as "all-talking, all-singing, all-dancing" features. The Indian sound film, unlike the sound films of any other land, had from its first moment seized exclusively on music-drama forms. In doing so, the film had tapped a powerful current, one that had given it an extraordinary new impetus. It was a current that went back some two thousand years.

<sup>16</sup> *Who Is Who in Indian Filmland*, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> *Indian Talkie*, 1931-56, p. 83.

<sup>18</sup> Interview, T. R. Sundaram.

### *Mighty river of music*

In ancient India, in the Golden Age of Sanskrit theatre, the idea of drama was already inseparably linked with song, dance, and music. In fact, we are told that Sanskrit and some of its derivative languages had no separate terms for “drama” and “dance,” and that the notion of drama as a separate entity, independent of the other elements, is still strange and “disconcerting” to many Asians.<sup>19</sup>

The dramatic practices followed by Sudraka (*ca.* 300 A.D.), Kalidasa (*ca.* 400 A.D.), and other Sanskrit playwrights were codified in the famous treatise *Natyashastra*, ascribed to the sage Bharata. This work has played, in Indian dramatic theory, a role similar to that played in the Western world by Aristotle’s *Poetics*.

Bharata, stressing the importance of music to drama, said: “Instruments are the very bed of a performance.” A Sanskrit dramatist, justifying the number of songs in his plays, is said to have explained that they “delight the hearts of the audience and establish the emotional continuity.”<sup>20</sup>

After Kalidasa the Sanskrit theatre went into a long decline and, after 1000 A.D., virtually expired. Its death was hastened by the various waves of Muslim invaders who swept over and ruled large parts of India during the following centuries. The Muslims had no theatrical heritage and at this time considered drama a sacrilegious activity. In the Muslim era court patronage of drama ceased throughout most of India. Sanskrit plays continued to be written after ancient models but as an exercise of scholars. Sanskrit, displaced as the language of courts, fell further into disuse, and the Indian classical heritage became inaccessible to all but a few. The theatre, for centuries, ceased to exist.

In the nineteenth century, under the British, Indian drama underwent a rebirth. It flourished first in the form of private family theatres maintained in the large joint-family homes of educated Indian families, especially in Calcutta. It was in such a private theatre that Rabindranath Tagore had years of experience as writer and performer before emerging, a seasoned artist, on the public

<sup>19</sup> Bowers, *Theatre in the East*, pp. 9–10.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted *ibid.*, pp. 24–25.

stage.<sup>21</sup> Both in the private theatres, which flourished from the 1830s, and the public theatres, which began in the 1870s, the new Indian drama started by adapting and imitating European models. But almost at once there was a reversion to ancient usage. As Indian theatre activity grew in various cities, drama, song, and dance once more became inseparable entities.

To Faubion Bowers, author of the fine, panoramic *Theatre in the East*, there is something almost mystical about this. The canons of theatrical art as practiced by Kalidasa had somehow, he feels, "remained as a kind of invisible law."<sup>22</sup> But other explanations have been offered.

In India the drama, much in the manner of the drama of ancient Greece, had originally developed from dances performed at religious festivals. As these added elements of narrative and dialogue, they became a kind of folk drama. The *jatra*, a form of folk drama long popular in Bengal and surrounding areas, apparently stems from this ancient period. *Jatra* means festival, but in Bengali the word also came to be applied to plays performed at festivals. Songs were always a central feature of the *jatra*.

While Sanskrit drama became an ornament of the courts, the *jatras* continued to entertain the common people. When drama was banished from the courts, the *jatras* continued in the villages. Traveling players, or *jatraawalas*, continued to journey from village to village, from festival to festival. The theatre was dead but the *jatra*, which needed no stage, lived on in unbroken continuity. Without patronage and generally looked down on by the educated, the *jatras* were not preserved in literary form but maintained a vigorous life. Ironically, dramas "were written but seldom acted, while *jatras*, which were acted publicly, were not written down till the end of the nineteenth century."<sup>23</sup>

There is no doubt that the *jatras*, crude and naïve as they may have been, had a powerful hold over large audiences. Some *jatraawalas* were idolized. The *jatra* also became at times an instrument of religious and social reform. The Vishnava movement, which

<sup>21</sup> Sen, "Bengali Drama and Stage," in *Indian Drama*, pp. 53-54.

<sup>22</sup> Bowers, *Theatre in the East*, p. 18.

<sup>23</sup> Sen, "Bengali Drama and Stage," in *Indian Drama*, p. 46.

rose in the sixteenth century and had the power of love as its central theme, made vigorous use of the *jatra* and other forms of folk music-drama for the lyrical propagation of its teachings.<sup>24</sup> And even in the first decade of the twentieth century Mukunda Das, a Bengali *jatrawala*, is said to have used the medium to urge the reform of Hindu society.<sup>25</sup>

Corresponding to the jatras of Bengal and adjoining areas, other forms of musical folk drama persisted through the centuries in other parts of India. There were the *ojapali* of Assam, the *jashn* of Kashmir, the *kathakali* of Kerala, the *leela* of Orissa, the *swang* of Punjab.<sup>26</sup> When a new Indian theatre began to develop in the nineteenth century, these folk-drama forms exerted an immediate influence: a vast tradition of song and dance was available to the new theatre. When the sound film appeared, this same reservoir pressed strongly upon it.

Thus the Indian sound film of 1931 was not only the heir of the silent film; it also inherited something more powerful and broad-based. Into the new medium came a river of music, that had flowed through unbroken millennia of dramatic tradition.

While this strengthened the film, it also had other effects. It meant an almost mortal blow to the *jatras* and other kinds of folk drama. The itinerant cinemas shouldered aside the traveling *jatrawalas* and took their place in the hearts of the people. As for the reborn theatre, the sound film almost wiped it out with one brush of its hand. Only gradually has it struggled back to a show of life.

There were other problems too. As the film appropriated folk song and dance to its purposes, it changed them. In their new environment they began, quite naturally, to respond to new influences. The songs were transformed through new instrumentation and new—sometimes Western—rhythms. Musicologists, just beginning to discover this same folk music, and to prize the way a song was sung in Assam in 1875 or in Orissa in 1892, howled in fury. "Hybrid music!" they cried—and are still crying, in protest against "film music." But that is a story for later pages.

<sup>24</sup> Debi, "Assamese Drama," *ibid.*, pp. 37–38.

<sup>25</sup> Sen, "Bengali Drama and Stage," *ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>26</sup> These and other folk-drama forms are discussed in *Indian Drama*, pp. 36, 75, 79, 95, 97.

In 1931 and 1932, at what seemed a dark moment in Indian film history, song and dance—in part derived from a tradition of folk music-drama—played an important role in winning for the sound film an instant and widening acceptance. "With the coming of the talkies," wrote a contemporary observer, "the Indian motion picture came into its own as a definite and distinctive piece of creation. This was achieved by music." He also observed that this same music might, for a time, tend to block the Indian film from Western markets, and this proved to be a perceptive prophecy.<sup>27</sup> It was also noted by observers that the obsession with music was a hazard to script values. A film periodical commented: "Cases of singing before drawing a sword for a fight are not uncommon."<sup>28</sup> In the Indian film world writers would have problems.

We have mentioned that the early sound era was dominated by new production units. Three such units were to exert special leadership. So important was their role that we must examine each in detail.

## Studio

One new company emerged in Tollygunge, Calcutta, in 1930. As Madan Theatres Ltd. disintegrated in the following years, New Theatres Ltd. rose rapidly.

Its creator was a young man still in his twenties, Birendra Nath Sircar, son of Sir N. N. Sircar, Advocate-General of Bengal. Born in 1901 in Bhagalpur, he was sent to England for part of his education, studying engineering at the University of London. He returned to India to pursue a career as engineer and builder. But one of his first building tasks was a cinema, and this contact with the film world proved a turning point. The young man decided to build a cinema for himself, and then became involved in two silent film ventures, of no special distinction. But he was learning his way.

<sup>27</sup> Desai, "Overseas Market for Indian Films," in *Indian Cinematograph Year Book, 1938*, pp. 291-93.

<sup>28</sup> *Journal of the Motion Picture Society of India*, June, 1937

Always soft-spoken, described as "the most well-behaved gentleman in the film world,"<sup>1</sup> B. N. Sircar was a contrast to many around him. He would quietly and carefully study a problem, then decide and proceed. Unlike most film leaders, he seemed to have no consuming ambition to be performer or director. Putting the right pieces together was his specialty. His pleasure was to give a good director the budget he needed, and let him go ahead without interference. B. N. Sircar was the first example in Indian film of the creative "executive producer."

Having decided to form a company to produce sound films, he moved ahead with speed and precision. No doubt his family connections were helpful. As the son of the Advocate-General of Bengal, he could apparently raise money at will. In fact, the chief investor in New Theatres Ltd. was said to be the Advocate-General.

By 1931 B. N. Sircar had built and equipped a first-class studio and laboratory and gathered around him varied talents. In choice of personnel he most clearly showed the quality of his leadership.

Some of those he chose are already familiar to us. When we last saw Dhiren Ganguly, the satiric comedian and director of *England Returned*, he was trying to recover from his encounter with the Nizam of Hyderabad and to form a new company in Calcutta. Several years of effort resulted in British Dominion Films, which finally went into action early in 1929,<sup>2</sup> but collapsed with the Indian switch to sound. After brief association with other ventures, Ganguly threw in his lot with Sircar and under the New Theatres banner directed several comedies before going elsewhere. The most successful of these, made in Bengali and Hindi versions, was *Excuse Me, Sir*.<sup>3</sup>

Another of those recruited by Sircar was Debaki Bose. This intense young nationalist, after writing and acting in *Flames of Flesh*, had gone on to directing—for British Dominion and others.

<sup>1</sup> *Who Is Who in Indian Filmland*, p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, February 10, 1929.

<sup>3</sup> Ganguly has explained its genesis as follows. Literary piracy and brain-picking were a constant problem. Therefore, when asked what his next film would be, Ganguly usually answered, "Excuse me, sir," and went on to another subject. When people began to ask when *Excuse Me, Sir* would be finished, he decided he should produce such a film, and did. Interview, Ganguly.

One of the silent films he directed, *Aparadhi* (The Culprit), made for a short-lived company called Barua Pictures, won high critical praise. But it was sound that brought out the real talents of Bose. Steeped in the traditions of the Vaishnava movement and its musical evangelism, he became a specialist in lyrical, devotional dramas.

His first talking picture assignment under the New Theatres banner was *Chandidas* (Chandidas), the story of a Vaishnavite poet-saint of the sixteenth century. Congenial to Bose, the topic was also suited to the developing music-drama of the screen. The film was saturated with music. It included songs based on the work of Chandidas and also much background music. Through *Chandidas*, Debaki Bose taught the Indian film world what could be done with background music. He showed that it could take over functions of dialogue and, while reducing dialogue, intensify it.<sup>4</sup>

*Chandidas*, produced in the Bengali language, was released in 1932. Enormously popular in Bengal, it put Bose in the front rank among directors. Its showings were necessarily limited in other areas of India. But Bose followed it in 1933 with *Puran Bhagat* (The Devotee), in Hindi, which "put New Theatres on the all-India map and created a veritable sensation."<sup>5</sup> Such was the appeal of its music that it scored successes even in non-Hindi-speaking areas. In 1934 Bose's *Seeta* (Seeta), which had been made in Bengali the previous year, became the first Indian film to be shown at the Venice festival. In 1937 his *Vidyapathi* (Vidyapathi), another film about a Vaishnavite poet-saint, was released in both Bengali and Hindi versions, and scored new triumphs. A musicologist of the University of Delhi has put *Vidyapathi*, along with *Chandidas*, among the "revolutionary classics" which altered "the conception of the quality and function of music in a film."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> A print of *Chandidas* has been preserved by George Eastman House, Rochester, N.Y. It may be mentioned that Nitin Bose, cameraman for *Chandidas*, later directed a Hindi version for New Theatres. He and his brother Mukul Bose, sound engineer for New Theatres, introduced into India the pre-recording of songs, to liberate the camera during musical numbers. Nitin Bose later went to Bombay and became one of its leading directors. He is a first cousin once removed of Satyajit Ray.

<sup>5</sup> Bhanja and N. K. G., "From *Jamai Sashti* to *Pather Panchali*," in *Indian Talkie*, 1934-56, p. 83.

<sup>6</sup> Bhatia, "Film Music," *Seminar*, December, 1961.

The impact of some of these films may be suggested by the pilgrimage of Kidar Sharma. As a student at Punjab University, in northwestern India, he had just finished his work for the M.A. in English when he saw *Puran Baghat*. The film was such a "revelation" to him that he set off on a 1,500-mile journey from Amritsar to Calcutta solely in the hope of working with Debaki Bose. Arriving in Tollygunge, he found New Theatres a growing, bustling organization. Almost entirely self-sufficient, it already had a payroll of several hundred people. Sharma served briefly as an extra, then was able to hang on as sign painter.

One day, as he painted a billboard, B. N. Sircar parked his car beside Sharma's ladder. Getting out, he expressed approval of the work. Sharma said: "If you would take this brush from my hand, sir, and put a pen in its place, I might show you something better." B. N. Sircar, amused, gave him an adaptation exercise. All this eventually enabled Kidar Sharma to work under his guru, his mentor, Debaki Bose, on the production of *Vidyapathi*. Meanwhile it also won him a chance to write Hindi dialogue for what became another India-wide New Theatres sensation, *Devdas* (*Devdas*). But this brings us to a man who played perhaps the most spectacular role in the rising fortunes of New Theatres—the director of *Devdas*, Prince Barua.<sup>7</sup>

Pramathesh Chandra Barua, son of the Rajah of Gauripur, was born in 1903 in Gauripur, Assam. After graduating in 1924 from Presidency College, Calcutta, the handsome young Prince left on a European tour during which he took interest in all the arts including film, delighting especially in the works of René Clair and Ernst Lubitsch. Returning to India, he faced the problem of what to do.

He had innumerable interests, and everything came easily. An avid reader and music lover, he was also considered outstanding as horseman, marksman, dancer, tennis player, billiard player, hunter. In his native Assam he had already bagged several dozen tigers, a rhinoceros, and innumerable boars—although it is said he blanched at the sight of a cockroach.

<sup>7</sup> Kidar Sharma also became a leading Bombay director.

anthimala. Thus *Devdas* brought fame to many people. And virtually a generation wept over *Devdas*.

Although romantic-tragic in plot, the script for *Devdas* achieved a naturalness of tone that was, in its day, almost revolutionary. When Kidar Sharma completed the Hindi version of the Barua scenario, one reaction was: "This isn't dialogue, this is the way we talk."<sup>11</sup> It was precisely what Barua had wanted.

In Indian drama, such dialogue had never been an objective. Dramatic literature had long been associated with the language of courts. Perhaps for this reason, dramatists in the vernacular tended to write in a florid style, reaching for a remoteness associated with status. But Barua had been exposed to European naturalistic trends and wanted to put aside such language. He also demanded from his actors a quiet, natural tone. An actress who joined New Theatres from another company was astonished at how quietly the actors talked.<sup>12</sup>

It so happened that Saigal, the new discovery who played and sang the lead in the Hindi *Devdas*, had a sore throat when the songs were filmed. He had been a typewriter salesman, earning Rs. 80 per month, when Sircar, interested in his singing voice, offered him Rs. 200 to join New Theatres. But when he began to sing for *Devdas*, his voice cracked. The songs were postponed, but the sore throat persisted. Finally he tried the songs in a quiet, soft tone. It fitted the acting style Barua was trying to achieve, as well as the volume limitations of microphone and sound track. In this way, partly by accident, was born a singing style that soon spread over India, and that somewhat resembled a simultaneous Western development, the microphone crooner.

In the story of *Devdas* the hero—like Barua himself—was the son of a wealthy family of the ruling zamindar class.<sup>13</sup> In the story

<sup>11</sup> Interview, Kidar Sharma

<sup>12</sup> Interview, Khote.

<sup>13</sup> The zamindar was an official instituted by the Muslims and retained by the British. He operated a tax-collecting concession in a specific territory. He paid the British-controlled government a stipulated annual revenue; collections from the people of his district were his concern. Zamindars were powerful, often very wealthy. Some became benevolent despots in their territories. The zamindar was often treated respectfully in films of the 1930s but since independence has become a favorite villain of period films.

Devdas falls in love with Parbati, with whom he has played since childhood, and who is the daughter of a poor neighboring family. The time comes for Devdas to go away to Calcutta for university studies. The parting is deeply felt by both. While he is away, her father arranges a marriage for her. She loves only Devdas but, obeying her father, prepares to suffer in silence the role of dutiful Hindu wife. The marriage takes place. Devdas, as a result, takes to drink. Among those who befriend him in Calcutta is Chandra, a "dancing girl" or prostitute, who is so anxious to save him that she is willing to give up her profession for him. Parbati, hearing of his decline, comes to see him to try to steer him away from his life of drinking. He says that, in the hour of final need, he will come to her for help. She returns to her life of duty. Eventually comes a day when a man, haggard from long illness, is found dead outside the high walls of her house. His remains are burned at the funeral ghats. Within her walls, Parbati hears the news that her Devdas is dead.

There are several things to be said about this story. Its "tragic" ending is at variance with Indian classical tradition, which permitted only a happy ending. Tragic endings were not used in Sanskrit drama and are even considered to be at odds with the Hindu view of existence. A life can hardly be interpreted as tragedy when life itself is only a transitional state. However, the tragic ending had become common in India before *Devdas*, especially in Bengali literature and drama, but this was apparently part of their European rather than Indian heritage.

To some extent *Devdas* was a film of social protest. It carried an implied indictment of arranged marriage and undoubtedly gave some satisfaction on this score to those who hate this institution. The powerful appeal of *Devdas* to the young must have been based in part on this element. Yet once this theme has set the story in motion, the film *Devdas* seems far less interested in the social problem than in the suffering. There was more than a little of German *Welt-schmerzliebe* about *Devdas*, and it seems to have done much to popularize the doomed hero in Indian film. Doom itself has appeared to become irresistibly attractive. Very often artist and audience have needed only the flimsiest justification to believe in, and share, the doom of a hero. If Western films have erred toward forced

able reception in England to open doors there<sup>35</sup> for Rai. Once more he launched an international production, this time Anglo-Indian, with English capital, and with sound. This was the beginning of *Karma* (Fate), in which Devika Rani co-starred with Himansu Rai.<sup>36</sup>

In 1930 the couple went to India for many months of exterior shooting and intensive study of Hindi; then they returned to London's Stoll Studios for the interiors, including the recording of the songs. For every shot, two takes were made: one in English, one in Hindi. Because of a limited budget, two takes were usually the limit, except for the songs.

The film took over two years to complete. It was a modern story about a beautiful young maharani (Devika Rani) who wanted "progress"—never explained—and her love for a prince of a neighboring Indian state (Himansu Rai) who also wanted "progress" but whose father, the maharaja, did not. Marriage brings her, by the rules of Hindu society, under her father-in-law's authority, and this creates the conflict of the film. It was premiered in London in May, 1933. Critics had some reservations about the story, which a few considered naive, but all fell at the feet of Devika Rani. "A glorious creature," the *Era* called her. "Devika Rani's large velvety eyes can express every emotion."<sup>37</sup> The *News Chronicle* declared that "she totally eclipses the ordinary film star. All her gestures speak, and she is grace personified."<sup>38</sup> The *Star* reported that "her English is perfection."<sup>39</sup>

Fox Film Corporation now wanted Devika Rani to star in a film about Bali, and a German producer wanted her for a film about a snake charmer. But Himansu Rai said: "Let us learn from these people, but let us put the knowledge to work in our country."<sup>40</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Rotha, *The Film Till Now*, p. 325, found the films "singularly uninteresting." But British capital showed increasing confidence in Himansu Rai. A British distributor had guaranteed the German backers £7,500 for British rights in *Shiraz*. *Evidence*, III, 1004. British capital also gave Ufa an advance guarantee on *A Throw of Dice*, and was ready to take the full risk on Rai's next venture.

<sup>36</sup> A print of *Karma* has been preserved in the National Film Archive of the British Film Institute, London. Sita Devi did not appear in *Karma*. Her successes in three Rai films won her a starring position in the Madan company. Not having mastered Hindi, she slipped from the public eye after sound.

<sup>37</sup> *Era*, May 17, 1933.

<sup>38</sup> *News Chronicle*, May 11, 1933.

<sup>39</sup> *Star*, May 15, 1933.

<sup>40</sup> Interview, Devika Rani Roerick.

Their film future, they knew, must be in India. With the advent of sound, this was more certain than ever. Such was the stake when *Karma*, in its Hindi version, had its Bombay premiere on January 27, 1934. Its reception once more opened the doors of Indian investors.

That year Bombay Talkies Ltd. was formed and a studio built. Under the painstaking supervision of Himansu Rai, it purchased the most modern equipment. In 1935 a stream of Hindi productions began to emerge from Bombay Talkies Ltd. Franz Osten, director of *The Light of Asia*, *Shiraz*, and *A Throw of Dice*, had joined the staff. A handful of other technicians came from Germany and England. Otherwise, the staff of more than four hundred artists, technicians, assistants, and others was Indian. It became, like New Theatres and Prabhat, a largely self-sufficient organization.

Mindful of the exhilarating days with the Pommer unit, Himansu Rai and Devika Rani soon instituted a trainee program. Each year Rai interviewed scores of job candidates, many sent by Indian universities. Within a few years the names of a number of younger Bombay Talkies staff members were known throughout India. They included actors Ashok Kumar (he began as laboratory assistant), Raj Kapoor (he began as clapper boy), Dilip Kumar; producer S. Mukherjee; writer K. A. Abbas.

Himansu Rai's desperate efforts for international co-production had perhaps been ahead of their time. For years to come, with the difficulties of sound, film producers in most countries would concentrate on home problems. Bombay Talkies Ltd. would do likewise. But co-production would, in later decades, once more emerge as a challenging and necessary idea, and in India the pioneer work of Himansu Rai would remain a reference point for all such ventures.

Bombay Talkies now settled down to a schedule of about three features a year. Some, like *Savitri* (*Savitri*), produced in Hindi in 1937, were mythologicals. This story from the *Mahabharata* had already been the basis of five different sound films in four Indian languages,<sup>41</sup> but the Bombay Talkies version was admired for its

<sup>41</sup> *Indian Talkie, 1931-56*, list, pp. i-xxvii.

of its area but also attempting, often through imported talent, to reach into and exploit other language areas. A listing, by location, of the production companies of 1937 shows the two tendencies at work:<sup>45</sup>

Bangalore	2	Kolhapur	6	Poona	4
Bezwada	2	Kumbakonam	1	Rajahmundry	2
Bombay	34	Lahore	4	Salem	6
Calcutta	19	Lucknow	1	Tanjore	1
Coimbatore	8	Madras	36	Trichinopoly	2
Dharwar	1	Madurai	7	Trupur	2
Erode	2	Nellore	1	Vizagapatam	1

The smaller centers usually began by concentrating on one language. The larger centers felt from the start that they must work also in others. Sometimes a film script, after proving a success in one language, would be reenacted in another, with an entirely new cast. In this way *Devdas*, after its success in Bengali, was repeated by New Theatres in Hindi and later in Tamil.

But a producer could save various costs by shooting two or more versions simultaneously. The "double versions" began almost immediately. In these, each separate shot is done first in one language, then in another. The operation may call for two complete casts, although dance numbers may serve both versions. The shout of "Bengali take!" followed a few minutes later by "Hindi take!" became common in Calcutta studios, while other combinations were heard in Bombay. Occasionally a bilingual actor might appear in both films of a double version. But the prevailing tendency was to use double casts, and this is one reason why film companies grew rapidly in size. The large companies acquired acting staffs representing two or more major languages.

Calcutta almost at once achieved a monopoly over Bengali production, using this as a base for forays into other language markets, especially Hindi. The Bengali-Hindi double version became a standard activity at New Theatres and other Calcutta companies—such as the East India Film Company, launched in 1932.

Bombay and nearby cities, including Poona and Kolhapur, meanwhile took charge of Marathi production, using this as a base for

<sup>45</sup> *Indian Cinematograph Year Book, 1938*, pp. 283-87. Lahore later became part of Pakistan.

incursions into Hindi and other language areas. Since Bombay was close to the Hindi area and had a fairly large sprinkling of Hindi-speaking people—such as factory workers who had migrated from rural areas—it was in a good position to take a prominent role in Hindi production.

The two leading languages of southern India, Tamil and Telugu, were for some years the focus of mighty struggles. When sound began in Bombay and Calcutta, there was no sound-production equipment or studio in Madras, the center of the Tamil area. The large Tamil market looked open to others. In 1932 and 1933, Tamil films were produced in Bombay by the Imperial Film Company, producer of *Alam Ara*, and a new company called Sagar Movietone; in Calcutta by New Theatres and the East India Film Company; and in Poona by Prabhat. For these films the companies usually arranged junkets of Tamil-speaking actors from Madras. This sort of activity stirred southerners into action.

Among those in Madras who had some film experience was K. Subrahmanyam, a young criminal lawyer with a passion for the arts. In the late 1920s, while getting a foothold in law, he had made side earnings selling stories for silent films to a newly formed company, Associated Films. This had been started by a professional strong man, Raja Sandow, who after playing hero roles for Chandulal Shah in Bombay decided to take up production in his native province. Associated Films soon "failed for want of business-like instinct,"<sup>46</sup> but meanwhile the young criminal lawyer had won local notoriety as a film expert. In 1931 a Madras financier, intent on producing a Tamil-language film, invited Subrahmanyam to write and direct it.

There were still no available facilities, other than three glass-roofed studios, and it was decided to shoot in the open air. One difficulty was that the financier had had a quarrel with a former business associate, who came each day and parked his baby Austin close to the production. As soon as he heard "Silence, please! . . . sound . . . camera!" he would start honking his horn. This persuaded the financier to settle with his former associate. And, although *Pavalakkodi* (*Pavalakkodi*) was completed and was a box-office success—it

<sup>46</sup> *Who Is Who in Indian Filmland*, p. 11.

had fifty songs—it persuaded Subrahmanyam that there were better ways of making films.

That same year an entrepreneur in Salem, T. R. Sundaram, took a group of actors to Calcutta, rented the Madan studio in Tollygunge for three months at a cost of Rs. 25,000, and completed a Tamil-language film that proved so profitable in the south that he went north for six more junkets, all profitable.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile Subrahmanyam was offered financial backing for similar junkets, for which he rented the East India Film Company studio in Calcutta. On the first such junket he took sixty-five people, renting a three-story house for them for three months and a car to shuttle them to and from the East India studio. The studio supplied all technical personnel, including its editor.<sup>18</sup> All the films were financial triumphs. Other producers arranged similar trips to Bombay.

The vistas of expanding profits meanwhile spurred construction of up-to-date southern studios. Several such studios were built during 1935–36 in Madras, Salem, and Coimbatore. These included a studio built jointly by several Madras producers, organized as the Motion Picture Producers Combine. Thereafter Madras was never dependent on northern studios. The producers in the Madras area now began to take charge of Tamil production, and gradually also took control of production for the nearby Telugu area, as well as the important Kannada and Malayalam language groups. By the 1940s Madras, grown powerful through its grip on these markets, also began to make astonishingly successful forays into Hindi production. In the 1950s it would in some years pass Bombay in volume of production.

Thus Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras became the three major centers. Each had its own language specialties, but for each the Hindi market remained a target. Here lay the big stakes.

There is an irony and a problem in all this. As the successful 1930s drew to a close, Prince Barua, whose native tongue was Assamese and who also spoke fluent Bengali and English, was being pressed to make his supreme efforts in Hindi. Similarly in Poona, V. Shantaram, whose native tongue was Marathi, was necessarily doing

<sup>17</sup> Interview, T. R. Sundaram.

<sup>18</sup> Interview, Subrahmanyam.

his principal work in Hindi. The partners of *Bombay Talkies*, Hilmansu Rai and Devika Rani, both products of Bengali culture, were likewise concentrating on Hindi. Even in Madras, speakers of Tamil were becoming producers of Hindi films.

What was this Hindi?

Bengal prided itself on a long tradition of Bengali culture, which had already thrived four centuries earlier in the era of Chandidas and Vidyapathi. The Marathi language also had a long literary heritage, including revered poet-saints of the thirteenth century and the beloved Tukaram of the seventeenth century. As for Tamil, it claimed a literature going back at least to the fourth century.<sup>49</sup> But Hindi was a new development, of meager literary background. For many producers it was as devoid of associations as Esperanto. Yet the troublesome structure of the Indian language map demanded concentration on Hindi. If many observers have found in the Indian film an increasing rootlessness, an increasing divorce from reality, one reason may be that many of its finest talents have had to exert themselves in a language not their own, spoken by people from whom they were both physically and culturally removed. This became, and will remain, one of the agonies of the Indian film.

We now list some of the companies that achieved success in the decade of the 1930s. Although seldom reaching the quality of *New Theatres*, *Prabhat*, and *Bombay Talkies*, the following contributed to the growth of the industry and the shaping of trends.

In the Bombay area:

**IMPERIAL FILM COMPANY.** Already mentioned as producer of the first talking feature, *Alam Ara*. An aggressive company of varied output, it averaged seven features a year during the 1930s. It made films in Hindi, Marathi, Tamil, and Telugu; it made the first film in Burmese; for export to Iran, it made three films in Persian.<sup>50</sup> During the decade its staff numbered several hundred artists, technicians, and others.

An interesting Imperial actress, star of *Alam Ara*, was Zubeida, a Muslim princess. Her career was symptomatic of a fairly steady shift in Muslim attitudes toward film and drama throughout much

<sup>49</sup> Sastri, *History of South India*, pp. 355-59.

<sup>50</sup> *Indian Talkie*, 1931-56, p. 24.

of India. Zubeida, daughter of His Highness the Nawab of Sachien and the Begum Fatima, had been permitted to enter films at the age of twelve; she was nineteen when she starred in *Alam Ara*. "She looks very innocent and charming with her beautiful oblong face." Her two sisters also began screen careers in their early teens and eventually their mother, the Begum, turned to film direction and became "India's first lady director."<sup>51</sup>

A more important Imperial star of the 1930s was Sulochana, born Ruby Meyers. Earning Rs. 2,500 per month in 1933, she was reportedly the highest-paid actress in India.<sup>52</sup> A Sulochana smash hit of 1934, produced in Hindi, was *Indira, M.A.* (*Indira, M.A.*). Its central character was a highly Westernized Indian girl, complete with Master of Arts degree, who forsakes the fine young man she was engaged to marry and weds a Westernized wastrel, with unhappy results. Westernized characters in Indian films, wearing Western clothes, smoking, drinking, and interspersing their speech with English phrases—"Correct!," "If you please," "My dear fellow," "Don't mention it"—were usually foolish, villainous, or ridiculous.

SAGAR MOVIESTONE. Already briefly mentioned. The proprietor, Chimankal Desai, had begun as a retail coaldealer in Bangalore, then turned film exhibitor, branched into distribution, and eventually came to Bombay to form Sagar Movietone, about the time Irani was planning *Alam Ara*. Desai, as distributor, handled some of the *Alam Ara* road tours and was astounded at the public response.

Having theatre interests in southern India, Desai quite naturally turned to production in Tamil and Telugu. After the rise of production in Madras, Sagar Movietone concentrated on northern tongues, mainly Hindi. It produced the first film in Gujarati, and also produced in Punjabi. During the 1930s it averaged six productions a year. Never pioneering in theme or treatment, it scored substantial successes.

A Sagar success of 1937, made in Hindi, was *Jagirdar* (*Jagirdar*). As described in the film page of the *India*, it had that free and unconcerned dependence on accident and misunderstanding that was—and still is—characteristic of the work of the less distinguished

<sup>51</sup> *Who Is Who in Indian Filmland*, pp. 49, 68, 72.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

producers. It told of a young man, Jagirdar, who secretly marries Neela, a village girl, but parts from her when he is "suddenly" called abroad. She receives news that he has been shipwrecked. She "becomes a disgraced mother" and attempts suicide, but is saved by a village boy who marries her and acknowledges the child as his own. Neela is very happy with her child, when her long-lost husband, having survived the shipwreck, returns. The *Hindu* reviewer adds: "This cleverly woven plot finds an end in a solution unexpectedly provided by destiny."<sup>53</sup>

**WADIA MOVIETONE.** Specialists in stunt films and also producers of mythologicals. Stunt films stemmed from the world-wide successes of Douglas Fairbanks and the serials of Pearl White, Eddie Polo,<sup>54</sup> and others. Stunt films continued to hold their popularity throughout the 1930s. They were generally period dramas full of struggles on the edges of precipices, replete with heroic action.

Typical of the genre was *Hunterwali* (Girl Hunter), a Wadia box-office triumph of 1935, made in Hindi. It tells of a princess who sets out to rescue her father, held captive by a scheming minister. She disguises herself as a man and roams the countryside, robbing the rich to feed the poor. She meanwhile meets a peasant boy and they fall in love. They fight side by side against overwhelming odds and eventually rescue the king.

Stories of this vein still command a vast audience in several language areas. In the 1950s we shall find such films playing a surprising political role.

Wadia Movietone was founded in 1933 by Jamshed B. H. Wadia, whose education included an M.A. in English and a law degree. He was a tutor in English at St. Xavier's College in Bombay before taking up heroic films. His brother Homi Wadia joined him, directing *Hunterwali* and many other Wadia successes.

Although their education seldom intruded on their stunt films, the Wadias pursued a notable side interest. Like a number of

<sup>53</sup> *Hindu*, August 20, 1937.

<sup>54</sup> The American Eddie Polo, now almost forgotten in the United States, was among the most popular film heroes in India in the early 1920s. In 1927 a headmaster of a high school in Hyderabad, Sind, told the Indian Cinematograph Committee: "I once asked my class of 50 boys what was their ambition in life. Five boys wrote, 'To be Eddie Polo.'" *Evidence*, I, 675. Many Indian producers today have vivid memories of the films of Eddie Polo.

### In the Calcutta area:

**EAST INDIA FILM COMPANY.** Founded in 1932 by R. L. Khemka, a dealer in automobile parts, who had an appreciation of good equipment. Its activities in the 1930s were varied and venturesome. Besides producing in Bengali, Hindi, Tamil, and Telugu, it made a film in Persian by importing a cast from Iran and another for the Malayan market by importing a cast from Singapore.<sup>57</sup> In the 1930s it had a payroll of 300 artists, technicians, and others, and an output averaging eight films a year.

Its early films in Tamil and Telugu involved the import of talent from southern India. This led southern producers to rent the East India Film Company studio for production junkets. When this in turn led to studio building in Madras, a number of East India Film Company technicians migrated south to the new studios. Calcutta technicians from East India Film Company thus played a prominent role in the rise of Madras as a production center.

Early in the Second World War the studios of East India Film Company were requisitioned for British army use.

Others in the Calcutta area in the 1930s: **AURORA**, a company that had begun as a traveling cinema in 1913,<sup>58</sup> operating in Bengal and Assam, and had later gone into production on a modest scale; during the 1930s it produced in Bengali, Assamese, Tamil, and Telugu; **RADHA FILMS**, producing in Bengali, Oriya, and, for a time, Tamil and Telugu; **KALI**, producing in Bengali, Oriya, and Telugu.<sup>59</sup>

### In the Madras area:

**MADRAS UNITED ARTISTES CORPORATION.** Formed by K. Subrahmanyam in 1936 as a by-product of his production trips to Calcutta. His partner in the venture was S. D. Subbalakshmi, leading feminine star in those tours. During the late 1930s the company had a payroll of 350 artists, technicians, and others. This included an orchestra of 22 musicians which did radio concerts. During the 1930s the company produced in Tamil and Telugu, later expanding into Malayalam and Kannada.

The earliest Tamil and Telugu films were mythologicals, but Madras United Artistes soon added socials. Subrahmanyam, one of

<sup>57</sup> Interview, Khemka, and *Indian Talkie*, 1931-56, list, pp. i-xxvii.

<sup>58</sup> Evidence, II, 666.      <sup>59</sup> *Indian Talkie*, 1931-56, list, pp. i-xxvii.



TAMIL PRODUCTION: SUBRAHMANYAM'S *Balayogini* (CHILD SAINT), 1936,  
FEATURING A BRAHMIN WIDOW, MADRAS UNITED ARTISTES

the few Brahmins among early Madras producers, outraged the Brahmin community by the production of *Balayogini* (Child Saint), made in the Tamil language in 1938. It told of a Brahmin widow who, driven out by a rich relative, decides to live with a low-caste servant who shelters her and her little daughter. The story offended orthodoxy on several grounds, but Subrahmanyam compounded the offense by persuading a Brahmin widow to play the role of the Brahmin widow. Brahmin widows were expected to shave their heads, wear only white saris—always covering the head—and live a prescribed life of austerity and seclusion. The sight of a widow was a bad omen. The sight of a widow on the screen was defiance of taboo on a grand scale. The film was especially successful because it introduced a new child actress, letting her speak simple wisdom and give voice to a skepticism that, in effect, heaped ridicule on caste restrictions. The child actress at once became one of the most celebrated film personalities of southern India, and "perhaps there was<sup>60</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Gopalakrishnan, "Four Decades of Tamil Films," *Filmfare*, April 20, 1962.

ing in Tamil but later adding other south Indian languages; SRINIVAS CINETONE, producing in Tamil; VEL PICTURES, producing in Tamil and Telugu; ROYAL TALKIE, producing in Tamil and Telugu.<sup>61</sup>

### *One big family*

The Indian film world, at the end of the 1930s, was marked by a feeling of confidence. It was also beginning to have the look of an organized industry. A Motion Picture Society of India had been formed in 1935, followed rapidly by groups with regional emphasis: in Calcutta, the Bengal Motion Picture Association (1936); in Bombay, the Indian Motion Picture Producers Association (1937); in Madras, the South Indian Film Chamber of Commerce (1938). Each began to issue journals, bulletins, statistical volumes. The industry was by now the focus of a trade press of sixty-eight periodicals, of which half were in English, half in various Indian languages.<sup>62</sup> All in all, as the industry in 1938 took note of its twenty-fifth anniversary, it had a look of solidity and self-respect.<sup>63</sup>

The developing feeling of strength was furthered by the structure of the companies that, up to this time, dominated Indian film production. The big companies of the 1930s, like the Phalke company before them, seemed to be extensions of the joint-family system. Many of the companies had, in fact, clusters of relatives. In India this is not considered nepotism but normal, commendable family loyalty.

Each company had a wide range of personnel and almost never had to turn to outsiders for help or services. Each had its own laboratory; this was long assumed to be essential. Each had its studio or studios and its preview theatre.

<sup>61</sup> *Indian Talkie, 1931-56*, list, pp. i-xxvii.

<sup>62</sup> *Indian Cinematograph Year Book, 1938*, p. 14.

<sup>63</sup> Marred, to be sure, by some discordant notes. A Bombay trade paper asked Gandhi for a message of congratulation to the film industry on its anniversary, and received this message from the Mahatma's secretary: "As a rule Gandhi gives messages only on rare occasions—and these only for causes whose virtue is ever undoubtful. As for the Cinema Industry he has the least interest in it and one may not expect a word of appreciation from him." Reported in *Dipali*, June 16, 1939.

Inevitably new interests and needs grew into new departments. Bombay Talkies maintained a school for children of staff members, which also became a school for child actors. Prize possessions of the costume department became a "museum" of historic costumes. Books acquired for reference became a "library" of 3,000 books and manuscripts. Prabhat had its "zoo," including tigers, deer, and birds.<sup>64</sup> Prabhat also had a swimming pool, for recreation as well as production needs. Bombay Talkies had its own physician, who operated a clinic and also supervised the sanitary practices of the canteen, which served breakfast, lunch, dinner, and—for scene builders—midnight snacks.

The educational impact of organizations of this sort was considerable. New Theatres required its staff members to be on hand every day during working hours, whether or not there was an assignment. When not acting, an actor might be put to fencing or riding lessons. Or he might be given temporary technical duties. At Bombay Talkies an actor was expected to do some work as a cutter, as an essential part of his film training. Similarly, a technician might occasionally perform.

Although some performers were "stars" in that they were widely known and featured in publicity, no real star system had as yet developed. The star was an employee; he or she was not the pivot of planning and was not in control.

Producer and director were the dominant figures. Throughout the 1930s the difference between the salaries of top actors and other actors remained small by the standards of later years. Throughout this period Rs. 3,000 per month remained the ceiling for star salaries at several of the larger companies.<sup>65</sup> An established lesser actor might get Rs. 600; a beginner, Rs. 60.

Looked at from the vantage point of later decades, the companies of the 1930s carried a large "overhead" organization. In truth, the self-sufficient studio could exist only because of the low salaries that were considered acceptable. Basic salaries in India were of course kept low by the existence of tens of millions living on the edge of destitution. In addition, the 1930s were a time of depres-

<sup>64</sup> Fathelal, "Prabhat Was a Training School," in *Indian Talkie, 1931-56*, p. 139.

<sup>65</sup> *Indian Talkie, 1931-56*, pp. 127, 143.

In 1941 Shantaram left Prabhat to "produce under his own banner." In 1942 one of Sagar's leading directors, Mehboob R. Khan—who had directed its *Jagirdar*—began producing "under his own banner." This process was briefly arrested by a war shortage of raw film. A government allocation system, favoring "established producers," gave them a temporary respite. During 1944 and 1945 the one-big-family studios lived on, uneasily, with the aid of this special protection. Then the fragmentation began again. By the end of the decade the one-big-family studio was an extinct species. Those that survived in name had substantially changed their structure.

The production statistics of the 1940s tell the story of the decline and fall of the one-big-family studio. The decline was paralleled by the rise of the independent producer—*independent of overhead*—who used a rented studio and free-lance talent. The new producer might be a complete outsider, or a star or director who had found a backer. Many a studio owner, renting his studio to these new producers, gradually became dependent on them—and so helped to entrench the new system and destroy the old. Here are the figures:<sup>69</sup>

<i>New producers releasing films during the year</i>	<i>Total number of producers releasing films during the year</i>	<i>Number of films released during the year</i>
1940	42	100
1941	46	102
1942	55	108
1943	46	110
1944	28	95
1945	10	84
1946	66	151
1947	125	214
1948	126	228
1950	113	197

But these are only the statistics. The shift was not only one in business practices. Behind the figures lay vast changes in the climate of an industry. To understand them fully, we must look beyond them to other changes—in India and the world.

<sup>69</sup> *Indian Motion Picture Almanac and Who's Who*, 1953, p. 238.

# *A State of War*

For India, as for all the world, the 1930s were a time of mounting tension. Throughout the decade there was the sense of coming world struggle. Wars in Manchuria, Spain, and Ethiopia, fiercely fought as they were, seemed only rehearsals for some mightier Armageddon, in which the world powers of the West would be, once more, under mortal strain. In India the conviction grew that a decisive moment of history was in the making, which would yield to India her freedom.

Tragically, this confidence brought with it rising bitterness. As deliverance seemed nearer, the structure of the future independent India became an increasingly burning issue. At the start of the decade, the differing views of the Indian National Congress, the All-India Muslim League, and other groups still seemed to offer hope of conciliation. By the end of the decade this was no longer so. Hindu-Muslim tensions were on the increase. The idea of a separate Muslim state, a "Pakistan," had been discussed since 1933 and by the end of the decade presented itself as a holy crusade. At the same time the charge was increasingly heard that the British, in encouraging Muslim sensitivities and fears, were using the issue to "divide and conquer."

In 1935 Great Britain passed an India Bill, adopting reforms to go into effect two years later. Burma would acquire a separate administration, which would place her close to dominion status. In India the reforms would provide for an extended franchise and transfer of various administrative powers from British to Indian hands. But the Viceroy in the central government, and the British-appointed governors in the provinces, would retain wide powers: independent legislative power, veto power, and emergency powers. Under these the executive could, for example, take control in any matter involving minority rights—which, in the eyes of the Congress leaders, gave the British a vested interest in minority disaffection. In the Congress the prevailing attitude was that of Jawaharlal

Nehru, who called the reforms "a new charter of slavery."<sup>1</sup> When the Congress decided to take part in the elections under these reforms, its initial purpose was to obstruct the new government.

Meanwhile left-wing influence in the Congress was growing. One of its most-admired leaders, Subhas Chandra Bose, was among those who unceasingly demanded more militant measures toward the winning of independence. As early as 1936 the Congress, under pressure both from radical factions and pacifist, gradualist factions, was warning Great Britain that India would not again participate in an "imperialist war."

Great Britain meanwhile went ahead with its reforms. In 1937, with the inauguration of the new government, and in an effort to promote an atmosphere of harmony, the British allowed release of a number of topical films which had long been banned—some since 1930. The list was an astonishing one, suggesting the extent of British determination throughout the decade to keep the passions of independence out of the film medium. The following films were released:<sup>2</sup>

1. *Mahatma Gandhi's March for Freedom* (Sharda Film Co.)
2. *Mahatma Gandhi's Historic March, March 12, 1930* (Krishna Film Co.)
3. *Mahatma Gandhi's March, March 12, Ahmedabad* (Ranjit)
4. *Mahatma Gandhi's Return from London* (Krishna)
5. *Topical of Mahatma Gandhi and Others* (Indian Topical Co.)
6. *Bombay Welcomes Mahatma Gandhi* (Pilmoria)
7. *Bombay Welcomes Mahatma Gandhi—with vernacular subtitles* (Bilmoria)
8. *The Return of Mahatma Gandhi from the Round Table Conference*—synchronized (Imperial)
9. *The Return of Mahatma Gandhi from the Round Table Conference* (Imperial)
10. *Mahatma Gandhi's Speech in Public Meeting*—synchronized (Krishnatone)
11. *Mahatma Gandhi Returns from the Pilgrimage of Peace* (Saraswati)
12. *Forty-fifth Indian National Congress at Karachi*—with Gujarati titles (Eastern Film Co.)
13. *Forty-fifth Indian National Congress at Karachi* (Eastern Film Co.)

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Wallbank, *A Short History*, p. 178

<sup>2</sup> *Journal of the Motion Picture Society of India*, August, 1937.

14. *Mahatma Gandhi after his Release* (Naujuvam)
15. *Mahatma Gandhi after the Truce*—synchronized (Imperial)
16. *National Flag Hoisting and Salutation Ceremony* (Bombay Provincial Congress Committee)
17. *Epoch-making Voyage of Mahatma Gandhi to London* (Saraswati)

Here, in capsule form, was a chronicle of the independence drive in earlier years of the decade. The period had begun with an historic gesture in which Gandhi, after a "march to the sea," had entered the surf, dipped up salt water, and, while thousands roared approval, placed it on a fire. The gesture was a symbolic defiance of the governmental salt monopoly and the hated salt tax. Throughout India it had spurred resistance to tax collection and made such resistance a sacred mission. It had led to riots and eventual imprisonment of 60,000 Congress members, including Gandhi.<sup>3</sup> All this and later symbolic acts and drastic repressions were recalled by the release of the long uncertified films.

The easing of censorship proved only momentary. As Congress leaders made increasingly clear their determination to boycott the coming war, British censorship tried to maintain a blackout of the Congress. Film producers now took to the casual introduction of Congress symbols into films. On a wall, in the background, one would see the Gandhian motif, the spinning wheel, signifying defiance of the economic pattern of empire. In a store there would be a calendar with Gandhi's portrait; in a home, a photograph of Nehru; on the sound track, the effect of a passing parade, with a few bars of a favorite Congress song. Often such symbols had no plot reference; but in theatres they elicited cheers. As war began, British censors ordered the scissoring of such shots. After 1942, when Gandhi was again imprisoned—along with a number of other Congress leaders—no photograph of Gandhi was allowed on the screen, no matter how incidentally. *The Journal of the Film Industry* eventually advised the government: "Excision of photos of the Congress leaders is not going to remove them from the hearts of their followers."<sup>4</sup>

Throughout these years of repressive censorship, Great Britain had also made varied efforts to win Indian public opinion. In the

<sup>3</sup> Wallbank, *A Short History*, p. 169.

<sup>4</sup> *Journal of the Film Industry*, February, 1944.

early 1930s it launched an Empire short-wave radio service from London. In 1935 a British Broadcasting Corporation producer, Lionel Fielden, was dispatched to "upgrade" the government-operated Indian radio system. One purpose was to broaden the potential audience for the London short-wave programs beamed to India.

On September 3, 1939, after the Nazi invasion of Poland, Great Britain declared war on Germany; on the same day the Viceroy of India, Lord Linlithgow, declared India to be at war with Germany. The Indian National Congress, condemning the resolution, said that such action could only be taken by the Indian people. The Congress expressed its abhorrence of "Fascism and Nazism and their glorification of war" but added: "India cannot associate herself in a war said to be for democratic freedom when that very freedom is denied her . . . a free democratic India will gladly associate

CONGRESS SYMBOLS IN ACTION: *Seva Sudha* (SERVICE HOME), 1938,  
SPINNING WHEEL NUMBER, MADRAS UNITED ARTISTES AND  
CHANDRAPRABHA (TAMIL)



herself with other free nations for mutual defence."<sup>5</sup> The Congress continued resolutely to boycott the war effort.

Most leading film producers supported the Congress position. But some, moved by reports of Nazi brutality and apprehensive over the German-Japanese alliance, were beginning to have other thoughts. When the government formed a Film Advisory Board in 1940 to make, and encourage the production of, war-effort films, J. B. H. Wadia, producer of stunt films and newsreels, readily accepted the chairmanship. British documentary film specialists—Alexander Shaw and later others—were sent from London to reinforce the work. Theatres were at first urged, not compelled, to show these films. But distribution results were very unsatisfactory and in 1943 the showing of war documentaries, either produced or "approved" by the government, was made compulsory. Meanwhile the government had also become involved in newsreel production. In 1940 it had signed with Twentieth Century-Fox a contract under which the latter made Indian-language dubbings of the British *Movietone News*. This later developed into a special newsreel keyed to Indian interests, a government-sponsored *Indian Movietone News*—which the government took over completely in 1943 and renamed *Indian News Parade*.

The showing of *Indian News Parade*, as of the documentaries—meanwhile renamed *Information Films of India*—became compulsory. Theatres also had to pay for the films; the rates ranged from Rs. 2/8 per week to Rs. 30 per week.<sup>6</sup> The private production of topicals now almost completely stopped. Great Britain thus put into effect a pattern of operation that was to play an important and controversial role in independent India.

But wartime developments in censorship, and in the compulsory showing of government films, may have had a less momentous effect on the film industry than other, simultaneous developments. These were perhaps not much noticed at the time, but their effect was far-reaching.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Azad, *India Wins Freedom*, pp. 26–30.

<sup>6</sup> *Journal of the Film Industry*, June, 1943.

### *In black and white*

The year 1940 brought to India a spurt in industrial activity. Iron and steel production was expanding. Indian factories, in spite of the war boycott by the National Congress, were making field guns, machine guns, bombs, depth charges, and ammunition for British and Allied forces in various parts of the world. Increased employment put extra money in circulation. The motion picture theatres were crowded. A drift from rural areas to city factories augmented the boom. Meanwhile the industrial growth also brought shortages and, as in the First World War, a black market in essential items such as steel, cement, cotton, foods. Anticipation of rising prices had brought speculation. When rice prices shot up, fortunes were made by the rice speculators. Thus the bulging funds in circulation included not only the wages of industrial workers but also various kinds of illicit profit. The new money that became available to the film industry included black market money.

A problem for the black marketeer was that his profits could not be openly reinvested. Therefore offers made to film stars in the early 1940s included a device that was apparently new to the film world. The star would receive a one-film contract calling for payment of Rs. 20,000. In actuality he would receive Rs. 50,000, but the additional Rs. 30,000 would be in cash, without any written record. To the star this extra sum, this payment "in black," was, of course tax-free. This not only made it especially attractive but gave it a patriotic tinge. For years the withholding of taxes from the British Empire had been held a service to freedom. Now, when taxes were going into an "imperialist war," denounced and boycotted by the National Congress, evasion of taxes was all the more easily rationalized—if need for rationalization was ever felt. The star's delight, personal and patriotic, in a partly tax-free salary coincided neatly with the investor's interest in off-the-record investment.

Not surprisingly, the "black payment" system soon spread, though on a smaller scale, to other key figures such as music directors<sup>7</sup>—considered, after the stars, the most important element in

<sup>7</sup>The music director, in Indian film parlance is usually a composer-arranger conductor. He generally works with a lyricist or "poet."

box-office success. To receive part of one's salary "in black" was a badge of distinction. The rumor that this or that star received 75 percent of his salary "in black" and only 25 percent "in white" came to be heard frequently in trade circles, and contributed to the star's prestige and bargaining power.

As the industry became more and more fragmented into small production units, which more often than not dissolved after one production, to be replaced by others, the film industry became an increasingly attractive investment opportunity for black marketeer and profiteer. Just how large a role this played in the rise of the "mushroom producers" in the early war years and after the war, no industry or government statistics can tell us. We shall find an enquiry committee of independent India concerning itself in later years with this thorny and persistent problem.

It was not only the stars and other key figures whose lives were changed by the inflationary war period. During most of these years, controls over scarce materials curtailed construction of theatres. While active producers multiplied, there was no corresponding increase in exhibition outlets. The exhibitor was now subsidized by scarcity of competition. The days when an exhibitor feared he would not have films to show were gone. Fear had shifted to the producer: would he have an outlet? As the producer was subjected to more and more competition and pressure, power shifted to distributor and exhibitor.

These knew what they wanted, just as the financier knew what he wanted: big star, eight hit songs, several dances. Producers, to clinch investments and distribution, knew that these were the fixed essentials. They therefore found themselves bidding competitively—and suicidally—for the small group of "big" stars so designated by distributors and exhibitors. As star fees shot up from Rs. 20,000 to Rs. 75,000 to Rs. 100,000 to Rs. 200,000 per film, the producer's own position grew more precarious. Yet the alternatives, as many saw them, were to play the game or quit. From a prewar average of Rs. 90,000,<sup>8</sup> production budgets in Bombay jumped to a postwar range of Rs. 400,000–500,000.<sup>9</sup> It was not unusual for stars

<sup>8</sup> *Journal of the Motion Picture Society of India*, January, 1937.

<sup>9</sup> *Journal of the Film Industry*, April 1950.

to receive half the budget. Failure meant catastrophe for the producer.

The producer, under increasing pressure, economized where he could. Training programs became an extinct notion. The lesser actors and extras, set adrift to free-lance, were paid at the old wages, but only when they were needed. Writers also felt the squeeze. Beverley Nichols, surveying the Bombay film world in 1944, found its stars "actually better off" than Hollywood stars, since their taxes were "a fleabite"; but the writer of a feature film "considers himself lucky to receive two hundred rupees." He adds: "That is one reason why Indian films are marking time."<sup>10</sup>

For most people in the industry, earnings and security were skidding. So were values, but during the war years the film world did not yet think of the change in these terms. The full effect would only be seen later. During the war years there was an impression of dynamic activity. There were more companies at work. Money was available. Films were being made in a somewhat different business framework, but many of the same directors, actors, and technicians were at work on them. Many of the films had the same essential elements as in prewar years. Surely many of them were excellent. It was only in later years that people became aware of the changes that had taken place.

In 1917 the *Journal of the Film Industry* looked back on the war years:

With black markets and corruption abounding in the country, businessmen began to think in terms of easy money and quick returns. . . . The inflationary war boom has been the greatest encouragement for all and sundry to enter the various branches of the film industry in India.<sup>11</sup>

A screen writer who had been with Prabhat and Bombay Talkies looked back at the same years:

As the industry gained dimensions, mushroom producers came in large numbers, and the first thing they did was to eliminate the position of the writers. They wrote stories themselves or adapted Hollywood films. After the Second World War, making of original stories became taboo.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Nichols, *Verdict on India*, p. 110.

<sup>11</sup> *Journal of the Film Industry*, September, 1947

<sup>12</sup> Vyas, "Writers Were Better Respected," in *Indian Talkie*, 1931-56, p. 119.

A feminine star of New Theatres, who had played opposite Prince Barua in many films, looked back at the same years:

The "star system" met with great success in the abnormally strained atmosphere of the war. It grew in size and in the huge deluge that it produced, the producer, the technicians, the writer and others were washed away.<sup>13</sup>

A producer, founder of Sagar Movietone, also looked back:

After the last great war . . . stars asked fabulous prices and on top of it, did not agree to work exclusively. So no other course was left to us but to close down and so we did.<sup>14</sup>

### *Allocation*

In the later years of the war there was still another development that must be mentioned. Like other problems arising during the war, this also proved to be an augury of problems to come in the years of independence.

In 1942 the mushrooming of production resulted in a shortage of raw film. The government temporarily eased this by putting a limit of 11,000 feet on the length of feature films. By the following year more drastic action was needed and a government allocation of raw film was begun. This placed a new weapon in government hands.

We have seen that government policy favored "established producers" and that this granted a temporary reprieve to the old, large production units. But allocation had other aspects that especially troubled these same producers. To receive regular allocations, the government decided that a producer must devote at least one feature film in three to a "war-effort" theme. After two nonwar films, he would have to submit plans for a war-effort film in order to receive a continuing supply of raw stock. Most producers and directors, as we have noted, supported the Congress noncooperation policy. Studio-owning producers therefore faced a painful dilemma. Professional survival required some activity acceptable to the British as war effort.

The dilemma produced some catastrophic films. Bombay Talkies, where Devika Rani was now in charge of production, secured

<sup>13</sup> Devi, "Rise of the Star System," *ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>14</sup> Desai, "Sagar Was Ten Years Ahead," *ibid.*, p. 127.

approval of a film on nurses as a war-effort film. Titled *Char Anken* (Four Eyes), it was a total failure at the box office, the first such disaster for Bombay Talkies. Similarly, New Theatres produced *Dushman* (Enemy), on tuberculosis. It had a better reception but did not add to the glory or resources of New Theatres.

The astonishing military advances of Japan throughout 1942 brought some shift in opinion, which helped a few producers to solve the war-effort problem. That year Japan took Singapore and swept through all of Burma. Suddenly Japan stood at India's doorstep. To some Indians the Japanese army represented a force of liberation, embodying the idea of "Asia for the Asians." Subhas Chandra Bose, former Congress president, fought with the Japanese forces, leading an Indian National Army and giving strength and substance to Japanese propaganda. But to some Indians the Japanese seemed a threat rather than a force for freedom. This created for more than one producer a war-effort opportunity and led to at least one comedy of errors.

K. Subrahmanyam, founder of the Madras United Artistes Corporation and a member of the National Congress, submitted proposals for a war-effort film, in the Tamil language, dealing with the imminent might of Japan. In so doing, he was condemned by some Congress members. The film seemed to tell the Japanese—"the enemy"—that India did not need her and could take care of her own affairs. Titled *Manasamrakshanam* (In Defense of Her Honor), it was approved and released, and became an unexpected box-office success. Seeing the spirited audience reaction, authorities began to have some uneasiness about the film. They became aware that its message could be interpreted in more than one way. In saying, "India can take care of herself," it could be addressing the British as well as the Japanese. In saying, "Go away," it could be echoing the Congress slogan of the hour, "Quit India!" In a few towns, local authorities decided to uncertify the war-effort film. And Subrahmanyam was regarded as a Congress stalwart rather than an outcast\*.

At the start of the war, those who wished India to follow in the path of the Soviet Union strongly opposed participation in the "imperialist war." They urged, along with Subhas Chandra Bose and other militants, a vigorous course of action for independence.

After Hitler invaded Russia, there was a sudden split among the militants. Some, like Subhas Chandra Bose, continued to urge militant action against the British raj; others were now urging cooperation in the war effort with Britain and Russia and their allies. This realignment of forces helps to explain what was the most interesting and successful of war-effort films, *The Journey of Dr. Kotnis*.

Its author and instigator was a rising young journalist of vigor and skill, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas. In *The Journey of Dr. Kotnis* he demonstrated an astute comprehension of political forces that was to make him an increasingly prominent figure, one who often played an international role in film.

Throughout his career he was a journalist with a foot in the film field. After graduating from Alighar University, he got a job on the *Bombay Chronicle*, and also did part-time publicity work at *Bombay Talkies*. At the *Chronicle* the aging film critic sometimes let Abbas review films for him. When the critic died in 1938, Abbas inherited the position. He soon became one of the most unpopular figures in the Indian film world. His pungent, lively criticisms brought to the *Chronicle* threats of an advertising boycott from film interests. The *Chronicle* is said to have solved this dilemma by elevating Abbas to the editorship of its Sunday edition.<sup>15</sup> The sequence of events stirred Abbas to write a film script, *Naya Sansar* (*The New World*), about a journalist under pressure from business tycoons—which *Bombay Talkies* undertook to produce. Made in Hindi, released in 1941, the film was a popular success and launched a vogue in “new world” films with “progressive” themes. It was against the background of these rising fortunes that Abbas approached V. Shantaram, now working in Bombay as an independent producer, with a suggestion for solving the war-effort problem.

The National Congress, while maintaining a policy of noninvolvement in imperialist war, had expressed its sympathy for the Chinese by sending a medical mission to China. Nehru had sponsored this humanitarian project, in which seven Indian doctors had served with the Chinese fighting forces. One doctor had married a Chinese nurse and eventually lost his life while on duty. Abbas had

<sup>15</sup> Interview, Abbas.

turmoil. Because of continued inflation and rising costs, the real wages of most people had declined, and millions suffered hardship. In 1945 there was a drought in Bengal, and thousands died in famine. In 1946 there were strikes and riots in many parts of India, and violent attacks on foreign-owned businesses. And as the partition of India became inevitable, Hindu-Muslim bitterness also increased.

On July 4, 1947, an Indian Independence Bill was offered in the British Parliament and speedily passed. On midnight of August 14 India and Pakistan became independent nations. Amid wild jubilation, the *Journal of the Film Industry* in its August issue declared:

. . . two centuries of economic and political serfdom have come to an end. . . . Under foreign yoke India's ancient art and culture were ignored. Base imitation of alien customs, manners and culture took the place of any organized effort to develop the indigenous art and culture. If the exit of British rule means anything at all this has to change and change thoroughly.<sup>1</sup>

The rejoicing was cut short almost at once by shocking events. The September issue of the *Journal of the Film Industry* opened with these words: "The first month of our freedom has set back the clock of our progress."<sup>2</sup> As refugees by the millions—Hindus and Sikhs leaving Pakistan for India, Muslims leaving India for Pakistan—streamed through the border areas in opposite directions, there had been murderous clashes. As terror spread, the massacres grew more grisly. Nehru, now leader of a nation, cried out: "Is this the realization of our dreams of a free India?"<sup>3</sup>

Ceaselessly, Mohandas Gandhi pleaded and fasted for an end of violence. He pleaded, too, that Indian leaders pledge themselves to oppose any anti-Muslim program, and pledge also to protect with all their power Muslim lives and property. Nehru and others took such a pledge. Slowly, very slowly, the fury subsided, but not until it had reached a tragic climax. On January 30, 1948, Gandhi was shot to death by a Hindu fanatic, Nathuram Godse. The body of the frail, revered leader was cremated near Delhi; part of the ashes

<sup>1</sup> *Journal of the Film Industry*, August, 1947.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, September, 1947.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted *ibid.*

was buried there, and other parts dropped symbolically into the waters of the Ganges and on the Himalayan slopes.

Sobered by the sequence of horror, new India began to tackle its problems as a nation. Besides the settling of 1,250,000 homeless refugees, there were the problems of the integration of several hundred princely states, disputes over Kashmir, a food crisis, the drafting of a new constitution, and the planning of long-range development and social reform. The new nation was 18 percent literate. Average life expectancy among its people was twenty-six years. The range of problems to be attacked—in agriculture, education, health, industrial growth—was staggering.

It is not surprising that both central and provincial governments began at once to look for new sources of revenue, and that they soon took note of the film industry. This industry seemed, at least to the casual observer, to be in a glittering state of prosperity. Its stars were rumored to have astonishing salaries, and a few had begun to live like a new species of maharaja. The old-style maharajas were now being "integrated." Most were quietly relinquishing their power and being pensioned. Even the Nizam of Hyderabad, after armed conflict, became as other men. But a new symbol of glamor and affluence was rapidly rising to take their place: the screen star.

Many of the leaders of the new India were studious, ascetic men. Many were products of a rigorous education. Some had spent long years in jail, reading ceaselessly in the history of the world, pondering the rise and fall of nations, and planning the coming transformation of India. They were intent on a vast program of change. As for the film industry, they had, like Gandhi, "the least interest in it." The idea of entertainment as a necessity of life was not familiar to them. If they thought of film, they thought of it as a potential instrument of social reform that was not being used in that way. They thought of it as too much involved with romance and immature hero worship. They associated it with Western influences that needed to be purged. They also saw it as a source of revenue. Not surprisingly, the year 1947 inaugurated a long series of measures affecting film that soon left the film world dazed.

Before the war most provinces had had entertainment taxes of 12½ percent. There had been wartime increases, considered tem-

porary. But on the heels of freedom came a wave of further increases. By 1949, when the country was being divided into "states," the entertainment taxes ranged from 25 percent to 75 percent, with an average of  $33\frac{1}{2}$  percent.<sup>4</sup> It must have been a disturbing experience for Indian exhibitors to read in June, 1949: "BRITAIN EXEMPTS 677 CINEMAS FROM ENTERTAINMENT TAX."<sup>5</sup> The headline referred to rural cinemas in the United Kingdom, which the British government was trying to foster through special assistance.

In India, increased state taxes were only the beginning. Some municipalities also began to levy entertainment taxes.<sup>6</sup> Others developed an ingenious new levy

for placing policemen on cinema fronts . . . as if the burden of maintaining peace before the cinemas rested on the owners of the cinemas and not on the government, as if the cinema audience did not compose of tax payers who had the right of protection wherever they were.<sup>7</sup>

These levies were in addition to taxes already in existence. Most municipalities were levying octroi duties on the transport of films from one place to another. There were also sales taxes, under which basic cinema equipment was taxed at luxury rates. Some of the taxes, such as internal customs duties, seemed like obsolete remnants of a previous era.<sup>8</sup> And of course there were income taxes—business and personal—and import duties on raw film and production equipment.

There were still other charges, not called taxes, but which seemed like taxation to the film industry. The British requirement that theatres must show government-approved documentaries and newsreels had become inoperative in 1946. It had lapsed because National Congress representatives in the central legislature had succeeded in reducing the government film appropriation to one rupee. The nationalist leaders, on the verge of winning independence, regarded Information Films of India as "a dreadful institution" which had helped to dragoon the nation into war.<sup>9</sup> They thus took the first opportunity to annihilate it. But scarcely a year later, in October,

<sup>4</sup> BMPA Journal, July, 1949.      <sup>5</sup> Ibid., June, 1949.

<sup>6</sup> Report of the Film Enquiry Committee, p. 36.      <sup>7</sup> BMPA Journal, June, 1949.

<sup>8</sup> Report of the Film Enquiry Committee, p. 205.

<sup>9</sup> Mohan, "Panorama of the Private Sector of Indian Short Film Industry," Marg, June, 1960.

1947, they decided to revive the mechanism in almost identical form. The states were asked by the central government to insert in all theatre licenses the requirement that a minimum amount of "approved" film be included in every program. During the following months all states complied with this request. Meanwhile a governmental Films Division, on the model of Information Films of India, was launched to produce such films. It promptly presented to all theatres a 52-week block-booking contract under which the Films Division would supply the obligatory films, and the theatre would pay for them. But whereas the British had charged Rs. 2/8 to Rs. 30 per week for providing this "service" to the theatre,<sup>10</sup> the Films Division charge would range from Rs. 5 to Rs. 150 per week.<sup>11</sup>

There were further increased levies. In 1950 the new government decided to institute a Central Board of Film Censors. There would still be censor panels in Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta, but under centralized authority. The film industry, which had long protested "vagaries of censorship," welcomed the move. But shortly before launching the new system in January, 1951, the government announced a new schedule of charges for the censorship "service." Under the British raj the producer had been charged Rs. 5 per thousand feet to have a film reviewed by the censors; the rate would now be Rs. 40 per thousand feet—an increase of 700 percent.<sup>12</sup>

There were still further new costs. A Calcutta producer sending a Bengali film to East Pakistan, his only market outside the new India, now found that in order to get his print back he would have to pay an import duty to his own government, far exceeding the value of the print.<sup>13</sup> The exporter of a Hindi-language film to West Pakistan had the same problem.

By midsummer, 1949, the film associations were estimating that 60 percent of all box-office receipts were going into taxes of one sort or another.<sup>14</sup>

If film makers thought that censorship would be relaxed with independence, they were mistaken. The new regime was moved, at

<sup>10</sup> *Journal of the Film Industry*, June, 1943.

<sup>11</sup> *Report of the Film Enquiry Committee*, p. 24.

<sup>12</sup> *BMPA Journal*, January, 1951.

<sup>13</sup> *Report of the Film Enquiry Committee*, p. 121.

<sup>14</sup> *Journal of the Film Industry*, July, 1949.

every level, by a reformist zeal. Even before the actual date of independence, with Indian-controlled governments already at work in the provinces, reform moves began. The provincial government of Bombay, having decided to introduce prohibition, announced: ". . . with effect from the 1st of April, 1947, no scenes showing drinking of any type of liquor will be permitted in any films."<sup>15</sup> A barrage of protests, letters, and delegations brought a clarifying order: "There are films which are avowedly meant to propagate the idea of abstinence. In such films, drinking scenes being meant to condemn drink will not be cut out."<sup>16</sup> But the film world was aghast that the original ruling could have been issued without any consultation or hearings.

The reform spirit showed itself in other ways. Another Bombay government body, in a report on music education, took occasion to condemn current film songs as seriously corrupted by Western influences and "alien to the genius of Indian music."<sup>17</sup> The reform spirit was further shown in censorship actions, which with increasing frequency cited no existing published criteria. With impartiality, censors began to reject both Indian and foreign films on grounds improvised as needed:

*Matlabi*—Hindi. Jagitri Pictures. Rejected. This is a sloppy stunt picture, not suitable for public exhibition.

*Jassy*—English. Eagle-Lion. Prohibited on the ground that the film having no moral behind it is not fit for public exhibition. Trailer is also banned.

*The Madonna's Secret*—English. Republic Pictures. Prohibited as this is a crime picture without any relieving feature. Trailer is also banned.<sup>18</sup>

As the new centralized board went into action, the trend continued. Increasingly the board seemed to be making aesthetic judgments, as in the following directives, all dealing with the film *Vairabmantra* (*Vairabmantra*). In each of these rulings, a sequence was ordered to be shortened, without any specific portion being banned. In each of these instances, the censors apparently knew exactly how large a cut would make the sequence acceptable.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, April, 1947.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, June, 1947.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, July, 1949.

<sup>18</sup> *BMPA Journal*, April, 1949.

Reel 7. *Shorten* the strangulation scene of Sanatan—44 feet.

Reel 8. *Shorten* the journey of the Bhairab to fetch the heroine—193 feet.

Reel 9. *Shorten* the chasing scene—169 feet.

Reel 10. *Shorten* the chasing scene—169 feet.

Reel 12. *Reduce* to the minimum the scene of Tantrik gloating over his plans about the heroine—21 feet. *Shorten* the fire scenes—47 feet.<sup>19</sup>

At the beginning of the independence period, as the new taxes and rulings began, the industry associations took an aggrieved, patient tone. They wrote editorials to explain their grievances, dispatched letters and delegations to various authorities. These seldom produced any results. That "our own government" should have so little interest in the views of the IMPPA (Indian Motion Picture Producers Association), BMPA (Bengal Motion Picture Association), SIFCC (South Indian Film Chamber of Commerce), and other units seemed to them at first difficult to believe. Before long the tone became less patient.

On June 30, 1949, the three above-named associations joined in an All-India Cinema Protest Day, during which virtually all cinemas remained closed as a protest against taxation policies.<sup>20</sup> The associations calculated with some satisfaction how much in taxes had been lost by the central, state, and local governments through the single-day protest. They said: "We may congratulate ourselves on our unity at least."<sup>21</sup> They felt they had perhaps taught the governments a needed lesson, but there is no evidence that the protest day had a restraining effect on any government.

A few weeks later the *BMPA Journal* published an Independence Day anniversary statement:

#### INDEPENDENCE DAY

Two years ago today, rose the sun over free India's horizon after a lapse of two centuries. That glorious bright morning seemed ever so brighter to India's multitude. They felt happier over the thought that they were free people. High hopes of a better future in the hands of the National Government made them feel happier still. We for ourselves, had felt so. And today, two years after, we find all our hopes shattered. Our own Government takes no notice of our grievances and all our problems remain unsolved. We feel we are on a raft floating on a sea of uncertainties with dwindling rations.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, April, 1951.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, July, 1949. *Journal of the Film Industry*, July, 1949.

<sup>21</sup> *RMPA Journal*, July, 1949.      <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, August, 1949.

If the film industry, or its organized leadership, was becoming disenchanted with some of the agencies of free India, it was clear that the latter were not growing in admiration of the film industry, which seemed by now to consist of hundreds of ephemeral enterprises that felt accountable to no one and were engaged in wild and irrational gambles contributing little to the great task of nation-building. If there were, among these implausibly numerous units, individuals who had done fine work and were still trying to do it, they were more and more overwhelmed by the growing chaos. Most of the entrepreneurs were intent on peddling diversions that seemed, at least to the government leaders, trivial and out of tune with the needs of the hour.

Meanwhile the government was itself embarking earnestly on the production of documentaries and newsreels. Asked in the Lok Sabha, the House of the People, whether the government intended to monopolize the newsreel field, or to enlist producers from the private sector, the Minister of Information and Broadcasting, R. R. Diwakar, parried the question: "So far we have been producing these films ourselves. If there are any proposals as mentioned by the member, they will be considered on merits."<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile the government's Standing Finance Committee stated in a report that "it is useless to leave the production of documentaries to private producers."<sup>24</sup> The industry protested furiously.

Thus the film industry and the government became in a complex feud that was to last more than a decade. In the background were issues of public versus private enterprise. In the foreground were issues of clashing interests, economic survival, and personality. We shall pursue in later chapters several phases of this long, bitter feud.

But for a time there was a respite, a bright patch in the clouds. Late in 1949 the government announced a new Film Enquiry Committee. At first the industry took a cautious view of this move. But an enquiry committee of exceptional caliber was appointed. It included two representatives of the film industry, both among its notable pioneers: B. N. Sircar, founder of New Theatres Ltd., and V. Shantaram, co-founder of Prabhat Film Company. The committee

<sup>23</sup> *Journal of the Film Industry*, April, 1950.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, May, 1950.

went to work with a vigor that gradually induced, in the film industry, a restrained expectancy. In its issue of December, 1949, the *BMPA Journal* interrupted its long series of pained protests with an optimistic editorial. The subject was the Film Enquiry Committee and its "earnestness and expedition." The editorial was entitled "A Ray of Hope."<sup>25</sup>

### *A new enquiry*

The chairman of the committee was S. K. Patil, who had been a member of India's Constituent Assembly. The committee held hearings in Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, New Delhi, and six other cities, and studied the 463 replies it received to the 7,140 questionnaires it had sent out. Like the Indian Cinematograph Committee of 1927-28, the committee did its work with dispatch.

Unlike its predecessor, the committee did not publish the testimony it had taken. One reason appears to have been that many witnesses were willing to testify only *in camera*. This seems to have had a connection, at least in a number of cases, with the problem of "black" payments. The committee reported: "Judging . . . from the frequent references to such items of "black" receipts and payments, it would appear that the evil is more widespread than is generally realised and deserves thorough investigation."<sup>26</sup> Testimony on black payments dealt not only with the custom of making such payments to artists but also with off-the-record payments made to theatres in strategic areas, to secure exhibition.<sup>27</sup>

The committee studied the problems of exhibitor, distributor, and producer. Not surprisingly, a major emphasis was on the progressive fragmentation of production and the effect on production quality. The most important recommendations dealt with this problem. The committee dramatized the fragmentation in a series of tables. The years 1946-49 were summarized as follows:

In 1946:

	<i>Total</i>
1 producer produced 7 films	7
1 producer produced 5 films	5
1 producer produced 4 films	4

<sup>25</sup> *BMPA Journal*, December, 1949.

<sup>26</sup> *Report of the Film Enquiry Committee*, p. 93.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

8 producers produced 3 films each	24
20 producers produced 2 films each	40
120 producers produced 1 film each	120
151 producers produced in all	200 films

Of the 151 producers, 94 dropped out in the following year.

In 1947:

	<i>Total</i>
2 producers produced 7 films each	14
3 producers produced 5 films each	15
2 producers produced 4 films each	8
9 producers produced 3 films each	27
21 producers produced 2 films each	42
177 producers produced 1 film each	177
214 producers produced in all	283 films

The 214 producers included 156 newcomers. Of the 214, 160 dropped out in the following year. Only 58 producers appeared in both the 1946 and 1947 lists.

In 1948:

	<i>Total</i>
1 producer produced 6 films	6
6 producers produced 4 films each	24
4 producers produced 3 films each	12
22 producers produced 2 films each	44
178 producers produced 1 film each	178
211 producers produced in all	264 films

The 211 producers included 157 newcomers. Of the 211, 151 dropped out in the following year. Only 54 producers appeared in both the 1947 and 1948 lists. Only 25 producers appeared in all three lists—1946, 1947, 1948.

In 1949:

	<i>Total</i>
1 producer produced 5 films	5
4 producers produced 4 films each	16
8 producers produced 3 films each	24
29 producers produced 2 films each	58
186 producers produced 1 film each	186
228 producers produced in all	289 films

The 228 producers included 168 newcomers. Only 60 producers appeared in both the 1948 and 1949 lists. Only 18 producers appeared in all four lists—1946, 1947, 1948, 1949.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, appendix, pp. 323–24.

The newcomers appear to have consisted in part of complete outsiders, investing in film their profits from other fields, and in part of previous producers appearing as new corporate entities. In any event, most of the films in each year were now offered by new units.

The committee recognized the radical changes involved in this:

Within three years of the end of the war, the leadership of the industry had changed from established producers to a variety of successors. Leading "stars," exacting financiers and calculating distributors and exhibitors forged ahead. . . . Ambitions soared high.<sup>29</sup>

The percentage of failure was also high.

Yet such is the glamour of quick and substantial returns which a comparatively small number of producers can secure as a result of the success of their productions that the industry has shown no signs of suffering from lack of new entrepreneurs who are prepared to gamble for high stakes, often at the cost of both the taste of the public and the prosperity of the industry. In the process many of them lose their own private fortunes in a substantial measure, make the general public pay to see pictures which not only discredit their intelligence but also enhance their reputation for credulity and submission to make-believe, and leave the industry "unwept, unhonoured and unsung."<sup>30</sup>

The committee noted that in most cases the producer, whether "established" or new, launched a production without sufficient funds to complete it. This had become customary in the years of fragmentation and rising costs. It meant that at some time during production the producer had to secure new finance, for which he turned either to a distributor or a moneylender. In most cases, one or more distributors became involved during production.

Distributors of Indian films had hardly existed in the 1920s, when many producers dealt directly with exhibitors. But during the sound era distribution had grown in importance and developed a pattern. It had, like production, become fragmented—in 1948 there were 887 distributors in India.<sup>31</sup> The nation was now divided into five distribution territories or circuits. A Hindi film might have some distribution in each of these. External markets regularly reached by Indian-language films, such as East Africa and South Africa, were sometimes treated as a sixth territory. The producer of a Hindi film often dealt with a different distributor for each territory.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

During production the producer generally sold off one or more territories to raise funds to complete the picture. A territory would generally be sold for a lump sum. In the producer's home area, where theatre attendances could be checked, the producer would usually try to get distribution on a percentage basis. If a producer had faith in his film, he would make every effort to retain this territory until after completion of the film. In many cases he would be forced to sell even this during production.

To retain some stake in his production, he might turn to a money-lender for a short-term loan, to tide him over the final weeks or months of production. Loans were generally at illegal rates.

At present loans are being obtained at rates as high as 60 to 100 per cent per annum. Interest is not paid directly at this rate, but is usually confined to the legitimate figure of 6 per cent or 9 per cent. The lenders, however, charge a "royalty" of not less than 10 per cent on the amount lent, and very often the loan is for a short period of three or six months, the royalty having to be paid again each time the loan is renewed. Royalty and interest are deducted in advance, on each occasion of renewal, making the actual rate of interest very high. The total amount paid within a year for the use of capital thus adds up to an usurious figure.<sup>32</sup>

These suicidal loans were often made necessary by production delays. A major reason for such delays, the committee found, was the involvement of stars in several productions simultaneously.<sup>33</sup>

Producers owning studios and maintaining technical staffs were especially endangered by such delays, but could turn to banks for loans, using their studios as collateral. However, production by studio owners was declining; a number of studios had become "rental studios." The overwhelming majority of producers had no tangible property, could not obtain bank loans, and depended on distributors or moneylenders. This had its effect on production:

The ultimate necessity of having to sell the picture more or less under duress affects also the quality of films. The producer tends to concentrate on the particular aspects of the picture which would appeal to the distributors and help in securing a quick sale or a good price.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>33</sup> The *Report of the Film Enquiry Committee* does not cite details. At the time of the enquiry, some stars appear to have been involved in as many as twelve productions simultaneously; in the mid-1950s, a few are said to have been involved in twenty productions simultaneously.

<sup>34</sup> *Report of the Film Enquiry Committee*, p. 97.

Similarly it has been brought to our notice that distributors make "suggestions" in regard to the story and sometimes about the songs and tunes. Considering the financial relations between producer and distributor, such "suggestions" are generally taken as mandatory by the producer. . . . Distributors appear to have been ultimately responsible for the temporary success of some "stars" who managed to secure on the strength of one "hit" a number of engagements which their merit failed to justify. They appear to have been at least partly responsible for the establishment of certain "cycles" in film-making, resulting in the production of a dozen different variations of a theme.<sup>35</sup>

The committee recognized that it was natural that a distributor should want to safeguard his investment and therefore suggest "what in his view adds to the potential earning capacity of the film."<sup>36</sup> Yet the committee seemed to lean to the view, expressed by some witnesses, that the dominance of the distributor was "baneful," and this led the committee to make one of its most important recommendations.

It was a recommendation made years before by the Indian Cinematograph Committee, and long recommended by the industry. The committee felt that a government-sponsored Film Finance Corporation should be established, with a starting capital of Rs. 10,000,000 and the right to borrow an equivalent sum,<sup>37</sup> to which producers could turn as an alternative source of capital. This corporation, like the similar corporation established in the United Kingdom, would presumably base its decisions on a set of values different from those applied by commercial distributors. The aim was to liberate the producer from the dominance of distributor and moneylender.

The committee felt that such a plan would have to be accompanied by efforts to reduce the chaos in production—to "rationalize" production. It therefore proposed a Film Council of India to "superintend and regulate" the industry.<sup>38</sup> The majority of the council would be representatives of the industry but it would also include representatives of the central government, state governments,

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 116-17.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

and education. As envisaged by the committee, the council would instigate research for the benefit and long-range development of the industry. It would have a bureau for the prior scrutiny of scripts, to curtail unqualified "adventurers." It would have under its supervision an Institute of Film Art for the training of new talent. It would give annual awards for outstanding work in film. It would foster film libraries and film societies, and perform various other functions. The Film Council of India, according to committee recommendations, would be supported by a share of state entertainment taxes, as well as by other taxes including a cess on foreign films; fees for services performed by the council; and nominal contributions by film associations to be sponsored by the council.

In the course of its study, the committee had a look at taxes. While defending a number of existing levies, it agreed with various contentions of the industry concerning the burden of taxation. It recommended that entertainment taxes be made uniform at a level of 20 percent. It criticized such charges as octroi duties, police charges, and internal customs duties.

It supported the obligatory showing of documentary films and newsreels, and the required payments for such films.

It recommended formation of an Export Corporation to stimulate the export market for Indian films. Among other recommendations, the committee proposed that the government embark on a carefully phased program of manufacture so that India could eventually produce its own raw film as well as various kinds of equipment.

On the whole, the committee had shown a desire to bolster rather than chastise or control the industry. It made clear that many witnesses had proposed nationalization of the film field, or portions of it, but the committee itself opposed such plans. It wished to keep film largely in the private sector. Paying tribute to past achievements, the committee added:

It is a pity that an industry which has grown to such proportions on its own, without either state support or patronage and in the face of foreign competition on terms which were certainly not much to its advantage, should find itself in the present state of doldrums. It cannot be denied that

the pioneers of this industry established themselves in spite of the adverse circumstances of patronage of foreign goods, of social stigma that attached to the profession, of lack of high quality equipment, and of dearth of artistic and technical talent. Nor can it be gainsaid that the contribution that these pioneers and their successors—famous names in its annals like Prabhat, Bombay Talkies, and New Theatres—made to the building up and growth of this industry despite these adverse circumstances was substantial and praiseworthy. Unfortunately, however, the industry was overtaken by war conditions while it was still none too firm on its feet organisationally, and when the storm and the flood came, it lacked the sturdiness of the giant oak or the strength of the embedded rock.<sup>39</sup>

While emphasizing the impact of war economics on the industry, the committee criticized those in the industry who tended to “ascribe all its difficulties to external factors as opposed to those within the competence of the industry itself to regulate and control.”<sup>40</sup>

The committee also noted that witnesses representing the public were freely critical of films but “unrepentant of their cinema-going habits.”<sup>41</sup> On the surface, it found the industry in a state of prosperity, with an annual attendance of 600 million people at its 3,250 theatres—including 850 traveling cinemas.<sup>42</sup>

In general, the film associations reacted with delight to the committee report. They had reservations about the extensive powers to be vested in the proposed Film Council of India. But the proposal for a Film Finance Corporation received, as was to be expected, enthusiastic support. The committee’s comments on taxation were warmly applauded, and government action was hopefully awaited.

The central government met the report with a long silence. It had other and pressing matters to attend to. A new constitution had gone into operation. In 1951 the world’s largest electorate, 107 million voters, went to the polls in its first national election. That same year the first five-year plan, an historic effort to lift India into the twentieth century, was launched. The following year an immense village development program was begun. As to the *Report of the Film Enquiry Committee*, the government said it was studying the matter. Meanwhile the states took no action on entertain-

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14–16.

ment taxes. A year after the submission of the report, virtually no action had been taken on any of its recommendations.

During 1952 the industry became increasingly restive. Overproduction had brought an increasing number of failures. Bengali producers, with 40 percent of their market now in East Pakistan, were having increasing difficulties. The Korean war had brought new inflationary pressures and controls; there was no abatement of black-market problems.

At the end of 1952 the *BMPA Journal* resumed its apocalyptic tone:

Farewell 1952. The film industry in India will look back on you with regret and remorse. You brought the condition of the industry from bad to worse. The tightening grip of the country's poverty hit us relentlessly. The hopes raised by the report of the Film Enquiry Committee were shattered in the course of your tenure. The Central Board of Film Censors as an expensive Government machinery fed out of the industry's resources forcibly taxed, is a clog to the industry rather than an aid. The Governments—Central and States—instead of helping the industry are trying to help themselves out of the dwindling resources of our industry. . . . may 1953 look on us kindly.<sup>43</sup>

Two months later the *BMPA Journal* ran a short editorial about the report:

FILM ENQUIRY COMMITTEE REPORT  
What has become of that costly document?<sup>44</sup>

The feud was resumed in earnest. A Film Federation of India had been formed in 1951 to represent the industry in its relations with the central government. It now put the tax issue at the top of its agenda.

We shall later trace several phases of this feud—especially struggles over censorship, "approved films," and film music. First we shall have a closer look at each of the main film centers during the first postwar decade, including the first years of independence. Each had by now acquired distinctive characteristics and problems. We shall take the centers in order of their production volume during the decade: Bombay, Madras, Calcutta.

<sup>43</sup> *BMPA Journal*, November-December, 1952.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, February, 1953.

# *Industry*

As India entered the era of independence, it stood second among the nations in feature production. UNESCO, comparing one-year production statistics, reported the following figures: United States, 459 features; India, 289; Japan, 156.<sup>1</sup>

In India, Bombay was the leading center. Its lead was so commanding that Calcutta was no longer considered, at least in Bombay, a serious rival. Madras still seemed a fumbling beginner. The following table shows the production shares of the three regions in the early postwar years. The figures relate to feature films:<sup>2</sup>

	<i>Bombay area</i>	<i>Calcutta area</i>	<i>Madras area</i>
1946	77%	12%	11%
1947	70	17	13
1948	65	20	15
1949	60	29	11
1950	60	21	19
1951	54	20	26

It was Bombay that had been affected most by the war boom and the influx of foreigners it had brought. It was especially in Bombay that adventurer producers had injected a new gambling air into the film field. Bombay had become the Indian glamor capital. It was in Bombay that star salaries rose most sharply. Bombay was now almost exclusively concerned with production in Hindi, from which the largest returns were possible.

Among the hundreds of producers active in Bombay in the post-war years, there were some who were continuing from another era. V. Shantaram, who had left Prabhat in 1941 to produce independently, released two features in 1946, two in 1947, one in 1948, two in 1949. He was thus in the select group of only eighteen producers

<sup>1</sup> *World Communications* (1951), p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> *Screen Year Book, 1956*, p. 474. In the table, figures for Poona and Kolhapur are included with Bombay; for Coimbatore and Salem, with Madras. During this period activity in the smaller centers was declining and the dominance of the main centers increasing.

sociations for Indian audiences, was merely strange to most Americans. And Shantaram's painstaking direction, applied to material of this sort, produced a style of acting that was mannered by Western standards. Yet *Shakuntala* might, in a later day, have fared better.

A few months after *Shakuntala* went west the United States Supreme Court, in *U.S. v. Paramount et al.*,<sup>6</sup> handed down a decision that was to have a profound effect on the film world. As a result of this antitrust decision, the climax of years of litigation, the major American film companies were ordered to divest themselves of the ownership of thousands of theatres in the United States, and to desist from block-booking contracts with other such theatres. The companies involved in the decision were Fox, Loew's (including MGM), Paramount, RKO, Warner Brothers, Columbia, United Artists, Universal. Through ownership of key theatres and block booking, the court found, these companies had acquired a degree of control over the American market that had virtually closed it to other producers, except on terms dictated by these companies. The success achieved by the condemned practices may be suggested by the fact that in one year—1943–44—the eight companies had received over 94 percent of the total United States film rentals.<sup>7</sup>

No governmental quota had at any time blocked entry of foreign films into the United States. Yet the joint control over theatres by the eight major companies had created an effective private barrier. The art-theatre movement, struggling into life in spite of this, was still confined to a mere handful of theatres.

During the decade after *Shakuntala*, the eight major companies, no longer controlling their home market and also slaken by the rise of television, sharply curtailed their theatrical production. Theatres, no longer controlled by these producers, turned increasingly to foreign films. By the end of the 1950s a thousand American theatres would be regular outlets for foreign films. Westward journeys would now find a wider market waiting.

<sup>6</sup> 334 U.S. 131 (1948).

<sup>7</sup> Conant, *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry*, pp. 44–46.

### *A star, six songs, three dances*

Meanwhile in Bombay, formula was king. The formula, as dictated by exhibitor and distributor, called for one or two major stars, at least half a dozen songs, and a few dances. The story was of declining importance. It was conceived and developed toward one objective: exploitation of the idolized star. The subject matter, with increasing concentration, was romance. An overwhelming number of Bombay films now began with the chance acquaintance of hero and heroine, often in unconventional manner and novel setting. In backgrounds and characters there was strong bias toward the glamorous. Obstacles were usually provided by villainy or accident, not by social problems. Dance and song provided conventionalized substitutes for love-making and emotional crisis.

All this was to some extent in the ancient Indian tradition. In *Shakuntala*, too, we find the erotic balanced with decorum. *Shakuntala* also began with "boy meets girl," with the introduction arranged in novel style by a troublesome bee. In a summary of the content of Sanskrit plays, S. C. Bhatt tells us: "The plays know love at first sight, not arranged marriages."<sup>7</sup> The obstacles, as in the formula film, were provided by villainy or accident. And the humdrum background was shunned in favor of sylvan glade or palace.

But though the pattern was traditional, critics of the Bombay film preferred to consider it largely a Hollywood infiltration. In an India dominated by the arranged marriage, the impulse to do this was natural. Besides, Hollywood was working the same dramatic vein and was thus a ready target. In addition, many producers had begun a conscious introduction of Westernized details, for attention value. In matters of costume, Indian censors had at times allowed some degree of physical exposure in foreign films on the ground that customs differed. Indian producers always protested this "double standard" but meanwhile responded by introducing sequences in Western-type night clubs, such as cater to foreigners in Bombay and Calcutta. If an Indian hero was going through a period of disintegration he would no longer, in the old-fashioned manner of *Devdas*, visit an Indian "dancing girl" prostitute; he would go to a night club and watch high-kicking chorus girls while guzzling illicit whiskey.

<sup>7</sup> Bhatt, *Drama in Ancient India*, p. 67.

young people in various parts of India were listening nightly to Hindi film songs on Radio Ceylon. The high point of the week became the Wednesday night Binaca Toothpaste Hour, a one-hour program on the Hit Parade formula. Sponsored by a toothpaste manufactured by the international Ciba company, each program was climaxed by the dramatic announcement, preceded by trumpet fanfares, of the leading song of the week. In many northern and central Indian cities, that moment found clusters of people huddled around coffee shops or other places with radios. At the same time the *BMPA Journal* reported: "Beggars, the vociferous among them, are become proficient imitators of film songs, and their dividends largely depend on how best they are able to sing a film song."<sup>9</sup>

If all went well, at least one song in a film would be a hit before release of the film. The impact of this could be noted in the theatres. At the first strain, of the already familiar song, an approving groan swept through the hall. In numerous instances films with hit songs, though disastrously reviewed, were box-office triumphs. Bombay saw no reason to change the formula.

Yet even in Bombay some producers, if only occasionally, swam against the tide. We shall mention them briefly.

One was K. A. Abbas. It will be recalled that he had written, partly based on his own experience, a 1941 film about a journalist under pressure from a business nabob. The success of this Bombay Talkies film, *Naya Sansar* (New World), had launched Abbas on a series of "socially significant" films. In 1949 one of these films, *Dharti Ke Lal* (Children of the Earth), became the first Indian film to be shown in Moscow.<sup>10</sup> It also ran in Paris and London. Telling a story of rural indebtedness and dispossessed peasantry, it used no professional actors. Abbas had been one of the founders of the Indian People's Theatre Association, dedicated to production of socially significant plays; *Dharti Ke Lal* had begun as an IPTA play and the film was produced under its auspices.

If Abbas scored a success with *Dharti Ke Lal*, he won a critical triumph with *Munna* (The Lost Child), produced by his own production company, Naya Sansar Productions (New World Produc-

<sup>9</sup> *BMPA Journal*, October, 1955.

<sup>10</sup> *Journal of the Film Industry*, April, 1949.

tions)—named after his first film success. *Munna*, made in Hindi in 1954, was shown at the Edinburgh film festival in 1955 and at a festival of Indian films in Moscow a year later. It was singled out for praise by Prime Minister Nehru. It was considered by the Edinburgh *Scotsman* the “worthiest film of this year’s festival,”<sup>11</sup> while the Manchester *Guardian* called it the festival’s “most delightful surprise . . . it shines with gaiety and imagination.”<sup>12</sup>

The leading character of *Munna* was a seven-year-old boy who escapes from an orphanage. Searching for his identity, he becomes involved in various segments of the world—and underworld—of Bombay.

Perhaps the most radical aspect of *Munna*, hardly noted by its Western admirers, was that it was the first Hindi film ever made without songs or dances.<sup>13</sup> Since the production of the first Indian sound film in 1931, it had taken twenty-three years for a producer to dare this experiment. Unhappily, while *Munna* received glowing praise, it was “not a box-office hit” in India.<sup>14</sup> It thus inadvertently bolstered the authority of those distributors looking for strict adherence to formula.

Even more ironic was the triumphant box-office success of another Abbas-written film which did follow formula. It was written by Abbas for a star who was rapidly becoming the most popular film figure in India—Raj Kapoor. Son of the distinguished actor Prithviraj Kapoor, who among his hundreds of roles had played Alexander the Great in *Sikander*, Raj Kapoor had started as clapper boy at Bombay Talkies. Soon getting a chance to act, he quickly became the idol of young India. Handsome and vigorous, he also had a talent for easygoing comedy, and for good measure was a fine player of the *tabla*, an Indian drum, a talent which was utilized in most Raj Kapoor films. In the postwar period he began production under his own banner, R. K. Films. Attracted by the proletarian themes of Abbas, he undertook such a theme—with a more sentimentalized

<sup>11</sup> *Scotsman*, August 30, 1955.

<sup>12</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, September 2, 1955.

<sup>13</sup> A Tamil film without songs or dances, *Antha Naal* (That Day), had also appeared in 1954.

<sup>14</sup> Holmes, *Orient*, p. 14, and interview, Abbas.

dealt primarily with the unmarried and educated young of the upper and middle classes, living in cities. In roughly half the films the hero had no occupation, in almost two thirds of the films the heroine had no occupation. In most films the obstacles were provided not by a social problem but by an evil character. Most films had an evil male character, roughly half the films an evil female character. With an average of 7.7 songs per film, in 70 percent the hero sang, in 23.3 percent the heroine sang but did not dance, in 70 percent she sang and danced. In roughly half the films the hero lived alone; in one third he lived in a family. The heroine generally lived with a family. Rarely did hero or heroine live in a joint family.<sup>20</sup>

The young people whose love for each other was the main concern in these films moved through a diversity of settings, exuding vigor and radiant health and usually surrounded by consumer goods. Among Hollywood influences, the consumer goods seemed especially prominent. Always singing at the top of their voices—via the voices of “playback singers”—the young people went motoring, motorcycling, speedboating, skiing, waterskiing. Always the lavish background, radiant health, laughter. Seldom the joint family, the arranged marriage, work, and poverty.

Critics liked to maintain that the industry had foisted such diversion on the people, had “conditioned” them to it, so that now they knew no better than to want it. More likely, producers were exploiting drives that were very much a reality. Perhaps President Sukarno of Indonesia, when he addressed assembled film executives in Hollywood in 1956, threw some light on what it all meant. He hailed these executives, to their surprise and perhaps discomfiture, as fellow revolutionaries, and thanked them for their aid to the national revolutions of postwar Asia. By showing ordinary people with refrigerators and motor cars, he said, they had “helped to build up the sense of deprivation on man’s birthright.” Millions of people, he suggested to them, would never again be content to lack those things, and had acquired an irresistible determination to have them. “That is why I say you are revolutionaries, and that is why I salute you.”<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> As reported in *Statesman*, December 12, 1959.

<sup>21</sup> Reported in *Variety*, June 6, 1956.

Was the formula of the Bombay film perhaps not as "escapist" as it seemed? Was it perhaps a step in a continuing revolution? Was it perhaps more closely related than many suspected to the five-year plans—whose essential base was an end of apathy and acceptance?

Perhaps underneath there was this meaning, but it was hardly in the minds of those who made and distributed films. They had found a pattern that worked. It was maintaining lines at Indian box offices. It was winning regular export markets for Hindi films in Africa, the Middle East, Burma, Malaya, Indo-China, Indonesia, and the Fiji Islands.<sup>22</sup> A few films went on into wider worlds. There was no reason to change.

### *Ordinary, decent, superdecent*

In the Bombay of the 1950s the salaries of the healthy and beautiful stars kept climbing. But workers on the lower rungs knew a different story. In 1955 the government of Bombay State<sup>23</sup> decided to make an "Enquiry into the Conditions of Labour in the Cinema Industry in Bombay State." Made at the suggestion of the central government, the study involved interviews with 621 film workers and resulted in a report issued a few months later.

The enquiry found 25 studios in operation in Bombay in 1955. Eighteen of these were available for rent, and half of those were used exclusively for rental purposes. Of the innumerable production companies only one, Shantaram's Rajkamal Kalamandir, had its own studio *and* its own laboratory. Of the 25 studios, 11 had changed hands at least once since the war. There were 11 laboratories, of which 7 had changed hands at least once since the war.

The technical staffs maintained by studios and laboratories were, on the whole, better off than the much more numerous workers hired on a free-lance basis. But even in such staff categories as assistant cameraman, dollie-man, assistant carpenter, electrician, and light-man, earnings averaged less than Rs. 100 per month.<sup>24</sup> Wage payments were often months in arrears.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> *Screen Year Book, 1956*, p. 229.

<sup>23</sup> Later divided into two states, Maharashtra and Gujarat.

<sup>24</sup> Report on an Enquiry into the Conditions of Labour, p. 48.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

It was among free-lance workers that conditions were most harsh and chaotic. The report states bluntly that since 1947 "the industry has been disorganized and polluted"<sup>26</sup> and its affairs handled "by men at the top in an unscrupulous way."<sup>27</sup> Late payment and non-payment of wages were common. The report stated:

It appears that it has become a regular feature in the Film Industry to change the name and label of the concern in order to get rid of the claims of the employees and, if possible, of all the creditors.<sup>28</sup>

A union told the enquiry that during the postwar decade the film workers of Bombay had lost more than Rs. 10,000,000 in unpaid wages.<sup>29</sup>

Written contracts were almost unknown. The enquiry also revealed:

In a large number of cases the employers obtained the workers' signatures for receipt of wages on blank vouchers. The date and amount is entered on the blank vouchers according to the requirements of the producers. This is one of the methods of adjusting "black money."<sup>30</sup>

The enquiry found 62.3 percent of free-lance workers to be "under-employed."<sup>31</sup> But in spite of the "unsatisfactory conditions," it found that

the workers hardly think of leaving the industry. . . . There are many instances of "light boys" and peons becoming directors and producers. These instances serve as a pole star to the film employees and 'hey remain attached to the industry.'<sup>32</sup>

While the report threw light on various kinds of workers, it gave particular attention to "junior artistes" or extras, and especially to women in this group. The report thus provides an interim glimpse of the status of women in the film field. It will be recalled that in the 1910s even prostitutes shied away from film but had gradually overcome their reluctance. In the 1920s the Indian Cinematograph Committee had concerned itself with the problem of securing women "of the better classes" for the film field. During this decade the situation had been somewhat improved by an influx of Anglo-Indian girls. These casteless children of mixed marriage,

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

never fully accepted by Indian or British circles, had found a welcome in film, and this had resulted in such silent film favorites as Sita Devi (Renee Smith), Sulochana (Ruby Meyers), Indira Devi (Effie Hippolet), Lalita Devi (Bonnie Bird), Madhuri (Beryl Claeßen), Manorama (Winnie Stewart), and Sabita Devi (Iris Gasper).<sup>33</sup> A number of these had dropped out in the sound era because of language problems, but some had continued.

In the 1930s the appearance on the screen of such women as Durga Khote and Devika Rani, both of Brahmin caste, began a more radical transformation in the popular image of the screen actress. The change was irregular but nonetheless marked. The role of Devika Rani was especially influential in that she was married to a highly respected film leader, was partner in a leading production company, and eventually became its controller of production. In a cohesive concern like Bombay Talkies, where the management watched over virtually all aspects of the lives of the company, banned drinking, and concerned itself with the educational development of the staff, the qualities of a Devika Rani could not fail to have an impact. Here and there "respectable families" began to allow their daughters to interest themselves in screen careers.

Devika Rani retired from Bombay Talkies in 1945 and did not again appear on the screen.<sup>34</sup> There were changes in the film field she had not liked. The kind of company Bombay Talkies had represented disappeared in the postwar years, and Bombay Talkies itself died a lingering death. Its last film appeared in 1952; thereafter its premises served as a rental studio.

During those postwar years screen stars continued to hold prestige. Such rising stars as Nargis and Vyjayanthimala appeared often on platforms with statesmen. But at other levels there were changes. The "junior artiste," no longer a member of a cohesive company, was now part of the floating population of "underemployed" freelance workers. The *Report on an Enquiry into the Conditions of Labour* revealed that most hiring of "junior artistes" was, by 1955, done through "extra suppliers." These agents received 10–25 percent commission from the "artiste."

<sup>33</sup> *Who Is Who in Indian Filmland*, pp. 47–74.

<sup>34</sup> In the same year she married the Russian artist Svetoslav Roerich.

In placing an order for extras, the producer customarily specified one of various grades. He told the supplier he wanted an "ordinary girl," a "decent girl"—this category was subdivided into classes A, B, and C—or a "superdecent girl." Rates for the categories were standardized. A superdecent girl was one who would seem acceptable in a high society or court setting, whereas an ordinary girl might appear in a crowd scene.

The system of ordering extras was said to lead to abuses. The report stated that the extra suppliers "have little social and cultural background," and pictured them as rapacious:

When an order is received from the producer for a "decent A class girl," the agent supplies that category of artiste and receives payment accordingly from the producer, but while paying wages to the artiste he usually pays her the wages of a "B class girl" on the plea that the producer required an artiste of the latter category and that he had done her a favour by securing her the day's work. The difference in wages is pocketed by the agent. The artiste is helpless, as she has no access to the producer.<sup>35</sup>

The wage scale for a day's work by a "junior artiste," as paid by producers, was given as follows:<sup>36</sup>

<i>Classification</i>	<i>Daily Wage</i>	<i>Commission deducted</i>
Ordinary girl	Rs. 5	10%
Decent, Class C	10	20
Decent, Class B	15	25
Decent, Class A	20	25
Superdecent	25–10	25

Total earnings of ordinary girls averaged Rs. 17 per month; of decent class C girls, Rs. 33 per month; of decent class B girls, Rs. 54 per month; of decent class A girls, Rs. 120 per month; of superdecent girls, Rs. 175 per month. Those who could dance averaged Rs. 194 per month.<sup>37</sup>

The report offered statistics on "age of entry." Among free-lance employees more than 10 percent started their careers at an age below 14 years. Most began between 21 and 25.<sup>38</sup> Newcomers, said the report, "are prepared to forego their wages for the sake of a mere

<sup>35</sup> *Report on an Enquiry into the Conditions of Labour*, p. 21.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.      <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.      <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

appearance on the screen." The wages in such cases were "swallowed by the agent."<sup>39</sup>

The system of recruiting extras through middlemen, said the report, "breeds immoral practices. . . Under threat of unemployment and starvation, the artistes cannot but succumb to the dictates of the supplier."<sup>40</sup>

Unionization was found to be in a rudimentary state. No film union had existed before 1946. A union of studio and laboratory staff workers was formed that year, and had survived and grown. Because the film industry was spread over an area of twenty miles, most workers found it difficult to attend meetings. Moreover:

Several workers stated that they were unable to pay even the small subscription of the union as they were not getting their wages on time. The financial position of the majority of unions is, therefore, far from satisfactory. In strange contrast to this, the workers getting fairly good salaries are not much inclined to join the trade unions.<sup>41</sup>

A Cine Writers Association and a Playback Singers Association had been launched but had ceased activity because of lack of support.

In its final chapter the report estimated: "The payments to the stars cost the producers anything from 31 to 50 percent of the entire cost of producing the picture."<sup>42</sup>

The enquiry was intended to include a study of conditions in Kolhapur and Poona, but it was found that production had virtually ceased in those centers. The final film of the Prabhat Company, in the Marathi language, had appeared in 1953.

### *Pageants for our peasants*

Two phenomena marked the postwar decade in the Madras film world. They seemed to move in opposite directions.

One was the rise of southern linguistic nationalism. It was anti-Hindi, anti-north, and extolled the glories of the ancient Dravidian languages and culture. It made Hindi a symbol of a northern domination to be feared and averted. It became a highly emotional force in politics. It also became strong in the southern film world

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

also astrologers. A new production was generally launched on a day and at a time set with astrological help. The industry was thus star-dominated in more ways than one. Productions were often started with appropriate observances, serving religion and personnel relations simultaneously. Trade papers often carried such items as: "The camera was switched on at 10:09 A.M. by the star's mother."

By 1955 star salaries, in the bidding against Bombay, were rumored to have reached Rs. 400,000 per film, in white and "black." Meanwhile in southern theatres a chief projectionist received a basic salary of Rs. 100–130 per month in the bigger theatres, Rs. 80–100 in the lesser theatres, plus cost-of-living increments. A chief ticket taker received exactly half as much. These scales had been set in a labor arbitration in 1947, and remained in effect.<sup>51</sup> Studio and laboratory employees lived on a comparable scale. As in Bombay, most free-lance film workers existed at more precarious levels.

#### *"O divine Tamil"*

While the south was pushing into northern markets, it was also the setting of a highly dedicated movement which was at first not taken seriously by state or national leaders, but which was destined to play a role of increasing importance. This was the Dravidian movement. The emotions involved were complex and had deep roots.

In southern India, alongside the national independence campaign, there had been for some decades another drive—the anti-Brahmin movement. The Brahmins, heading the Indian caste structure, were identified in the southern mind with the Aryans who, long before the Christian era, had started pushing down from the north and had imposed their rule on the older Dravidian civilization. Hindu culture had emerged from the synthesis of these two civilizations. In the oversimplified view favored by many non-Brahmins, the Brahmin caste was a final precipitate of the conquering Aryans, while the lower castes represented the old Dravidian order. This view gave the non-Brahmin castes a sense of solidarity in relation to the Brahmins.

<sup>51</sup> *In the Court of the Industrial Tribunal*, pp. 54–60. These pay scales remained unchanged until 1961.

During much of the British era, government positions and special privileges went almost exclusively to Brahmins. In a sense, the early policy of the British was to accept and adopt the caste structure, ruling through its top layer. It was not until the 1930s that the Brahmin supremacy began to be weakened by the non-Brahmin alliance.

The Brahmins had always fostered the study of Sanskrit, the Aryan linguistic heritage. Brahmins in Madras tended to look down on vernacular Tamil and to embellish their own Tamil with words coined from Sanskrit. In response, it became a matter of sacred duty among non-Brahmins to purge their speech of all Sanskrit taint. The anti-Sanskrit purge reached the height of its fervor around 1930.

During the 1930s, in anticipation of independence, there began a drive by many leaders of the National Congress to build Hindi—based on Sanskrit—as a future national language. It gathered wide support in the north but growing resistance in the south. The Dravidians looked on the imposition of any strange tongue as a badge of servitude. They had felt this way about the Sanskrit of the Aryan and the English of the British raj; they felt the same way about the Hindi of the north.

Under the new constitution promulgated by the British in 1935, the Brahmin scholar C. Rajagopalachari became chief minister of Madras in 1938. He was a brilliant, sharp-witted writer and speaker, a Sanskrit pundit, a friend of Gandhi and Nehru, a respected leader of the National Congress. He was also a man of strongly held convictions. One of his first acts was to decree compulsory study of Hindi in the schools of the province of Madras.

The move caused such a tumult, such firm resistance, that it was abandoned in two years. But after independence the need for a national language was again widely discussed. It seemed unthinkable that affairs of national departments, legislatures, and courts should continue to be conducted in English, a language understood by only a thin stratum of Indian society, and identified with colonial rule. In the view of many leaders, Hindi based on Sanskrit was the only conceivable choice. All India Radio began to feature a Sanskritized Hindi. The Constitution of 1950 specifically designated Hindi as the national medium, but the time of its official inauguration was

postponed. Meanwhile, there would be time for education and evaluation of progress made. Most states adopted the study of Hindi, but the south had its own formula. In Madras State a child had to study Tamil—and one other Indian language. This resulted in many children studying Hindi, but the accepted interpretation was that though one might have to study Hindi, there was no need to pass an examination.

Every move toward the imposition of Hindi seemed to stiffen southern resistance. The issue provided the emotional base for various new associations and parties. One of these, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam or D.M.K.—the Dravidian Forward Movement—was formed in 1949. Its founder was a dramatist and sometime actor, C. N. Annadurai, who held a master's degree from the University of Madras and quickly won fame for the vivid imagery of his speech and his flair for impromptu alliteration in "chaste Tamil." Annadurai was, at about this time, becoming involved in film, and before long various film stars and writers rallied to the D.M.K.

In the early 1950s they began the casual introduction into films of symbols of their movement. References to the colors black and red, adopted as party colors, became frequent. The word *anna*, big brother—popular name for Annadurai, the party leader—was often used. Later the motif of a rising sun, adopted as party emblem, began to appear. Any such symbol would evoke wild applause in the theatre.

All this quickly developed into a popular game between audience and producer. It led to such dialogue as:

Man 1: The night is dark.

Man 2: Don't worry! The rising sun will soon bring light and good fortune.

(Audience: wild cheers and applause)

Or:

He: Believe me, sister!

She: I do, Anna, I do! The whole land believes in you, and will follow you.

(Audience: wild cheers and applause)

**In the casual selection of a sari:**

**She: I always like a black sari with a red border.**

*(Audience: wild cheers and applause)*

**Two people lost in a forest:**

**Man 1: Should we turn north?**

**Man 2: No, never! South is much better.**

*(Audience: wild cheers and applause)*

This was, of course, the very technique used by the Congress in earlier years. Again it proved its effectiveness. So noisy was the approval that greeted these casual Dravidian injections that producers unconnected with the movement began to use the symbols. They too wanted the applause. Actors found it prudent to associate themselves with the movement.

All these symbols, like the Congress symbols, appeared in stories that had no specific relation to the movement. Yet as a result of the symbols, the stories occasionally seemed to take on new meanings. In the mid-1950s M. G. Ramachandran, one of the two most popular of south Indian stars, began to specialize in stunt roles in the Douglas Fairbanks tradition. He appeared as folk-hero, battling royal usurpers and their henchmen, fighting against incredible odds. Many critics considered the stories purely "escapist." Ramachandran expressed the opinion that they were not escapist. To his public—so Ramachandran explained—the long-entrenched Congress leadership in New Delhi had become a species of royalty, and the folk-hero symbolized the southern Dravidian, struggling against odds to establish justice.

One such folk-hero film, *Nadodi Mannan* (The Vagabond King), was vaguely set in an earlier era. Its opening song began: "O divine Tamil, we bow to you, who reflect the glories of ancient Dravidians."<sup>52</sup>

Throughout this period, film actors and writers played a role in party rallies. These rallies were usually advertised as occasions for meeting stars. One of the stars who appeared in such rallies, though not otherwise identified with the movement, was N. S. Krishnan.

<sup>52</sup> From the film *Nadodi Mannan*, produced by Emgeeyar Pictures.

said, had at least opened the door to new worlds of knowledge and ideas. Hindi, the Esperanto of the north, would open no such doors.

In the independence era, C. Rajagopalachari returned to state office. Representing the Congress party, he was chief minister of Madras State from 1952 to 1955. During these years it was clear that the D.M.K. was building strength, but most government leaders regarded it with amusement. Rajagopalachari hardly noticed it. K. Kammaraj, who succeeded him as chief minister in 1955, again representing the Congress, was openly scornful. He was quoted as asking: "How can there be government by actors?" For "actors" he used the most contemptuous term available—*koothadi*, or mountebank. The contempt rallied the screen world to the D.M.K. The party thrived on the ridicule heaped on it.

The time would come only a few years later when this absurdity, this fan club in politics, this troupe of mountebanks, would set the National Congress rocking on its heels, win a majority in the Madras city council, elect fifty members to the state legislative council, and send Annadurai, big brother, north to New Delhi, to the Raja Sabha—upper house of the parliament—to speak his defiance in the very fortress of the enemy. And by that time C. Rajagopalachari, at odds with the Congress and now founder of a new conservative party, Swatantra, would actually have a working alliance with the party of mountebanks.

But all this was inconceivable in the early 1950s, when the D.M.K. was just beginning its career of booking stars for quasi-political rallies of movie fans. At that time the D.M.K. was largely an oddity. The big film story then was the rise of Gemini Studios and A.V.M. Productions in the Hindi market. Both were building national distribution organizations, the only Indian producers so organized, and were beginning to have a look of national stature.

S. S. Vasan of Gemini, at the crest of his triumphs with *Chandrakekha* and later pictures, was rapidly becoming an acknowledged leader of the all-India film industry. A constant traveler, he crusaded with characteristic vigor against the heavy taxes imposed on the film industry. In 1953 he arranged a large meeting of film celebrities in Madras. To this he invited C. Rajagopalachari, the chief minister of the state.

C. Rajagopalachari had long been outspoken in his dislike for films. He often advised people to avoid them. He felt the Indian industry was imitating the producers of "the smutty west," who, in his opinion, "create sin." He felt that the view of life constantly shown on the screen was adding to "man's quantum of sex urge," and that this was precisely what India did not need.<sup>56</sup> But he accepted the invitation from Vasan.

As he sat quietly on the platform, speeches began. One was by Vasan. He said that some people always spoke of the film industry as some sort of educational institution. It was nothing of the sort, he suggested. A film, to meet its cost, had to please 10 million people. If films were made to please social reformers, they would not even reach 15,000 people. The real function of film, said Vasan, was to entertain, and to that end the producer should dedicate himself. Next he spoke of taxes. He mentioned *Chandrakanta* and its domestic gross of Rs. 10,000,000, at least half of which had gone into taxes. He gave an estimate of what the film industry as a whole was contributing to central, state, and local exchequers. He insisted it was an excessive burden and that parts of the film world were being bled to death. He suggested the governments should mend their ways. Otherwise, he proposed, it would be a sound idea for the film industry to stop production for a while and halt the ample flow of tax revenue.

C. Rajagopalachari was invited to comment if he wished to. He did wish to. He welcomed the fact that Mr. Vasan had disclaimed an educational role. Education, he agreed, required qualified people. As to taxes, he reminded Mr. Vasan that he, Rajagopalachari, had campaigned for prohibition, and had thus worked to put an end to another corrupting influence, even though it had brought in more taxes than the film industry. He urged Mr. Vasan not to pursue this argument. However, Mr. Vasan had suggested that the film industry should voluntarily stop producing. If the industry itself should actually devote its attention to "reducing this poison," and terminate itself, that would be something unique, and an extraordinary service. If it should end entirely, he would not be sorry,

<sup>56</sup> *Indian Express*, August 6, 1953.

the minister said. He assured Mr. Vasan of his support.<sup>57</sup> The *Indian Express* reported further: "The function concluded with a dance performance by Vyjayanthimala."<sup>58</sup>

### *A 40 percent loss*

While Bombay was holding its lead as the major film center and while Madras, spurred by linguistic nationalism, was consolidating its strength in the south and invading northern Hindi markets, the film world of Calcutta was in the doldrums.

No other production center had been so injured by partition. Of the Bengali-language market that had been its domain, 40 percent had become part of East Pakistan. Part of the Hindi-language market had also become foreign territory, in West Pakistan, but this was a minor loss to Hindi producers compared to the truncation suffered by Bengali producers.

The failure of India and Pakistan to agree on an exchange rate for their respective rupees soon proved costly to Calcutta producers. Pakistan decreed its own exchange rates, with the result that film rental remissions fell sharply. There were also reports of Pakistan levying a special "penalty" on Indian films, although the nature of this penalty was not clear and reports were contradictory.<sup>59</sup> Meanwhile the Indian government added to the problems of film exporters by its "reimport" policies. When prints came back from East Pakistan, the only Bengali-language market outside India, they were treated by India as new imports of "exposed film" and an import duty was levied. This duty had been designed originally as a way of deriving revenue from importers of foreign films. Now this import duty, exceeding the laboratory value of the print, fell heavily on the Calcutta film world. The economics of export to this limited area became forbidding. At the same time the small Pakistan film industry was beginning to ask for protection from Indian competition, and eventual moves in this direction were considered certain.

<sup>57</sup> Account based on *Hindu*, August 6, 1953; *Indian Express*, August 6, 1953; and interviews with film makers.

<sup>58</sup> *Indian Express*, August 6, 1953.

<sup>59</sup> *Report of the Film Enquiry Committee*, pp. 120-21.

All these problems were accompanied by increases in production costs and the sharp rise in taxes. Throughout the postwar decade this combination of blows cast gloom over the Calcutta film world. Editorials in the *BMPA Journal* sounded, month after month, like speeches of a doomed film hero.

#### GATHERING CLOUDS

The depression is already here. Clouds are gathering in the sky over Bengal's film-land. They are dark and laden with ruinous rains. All in the film-land should congregate, to confer, how best to ward off the coming calamity. The strong should now help the weak to get a foothold and the weak thus helped, should remember to reciprocate when today's strong become weak later.<sup>60</sup>

Ironically there was, throughout this period, a surface prosperity for Bengali films. As elsewhere in India, lines waited at low-price windows; tickets for hits disappeared into the black market. This was partly because the central government, after 1948, had called a virtual halt to cinema building, to save raw materials. For years the growth of exhibition facilities had lagged behind the growth of production. A shrinking market now supported a bulging industry.

In 1951 M. D. Chatterjee, president of the Bengal Motion Picture Association, referring to the "queues in front of the theatres," said emphatically:

This profile of prosperity is a deceptive facade. . . . Of the forty-three films in the Bengali language\* released in 1950 hardly a dozen will cover their cost and bring some return to the producers. . . . near-paralysis has afflicted the production industry in Bengal.<sup>61</sup>

For the year 1950, he estimated the loss on unsuccessful pictures at Rs. 2,500,000. He estimated an additional loss of Rs. 3,500,000 on pictures abandoned in the midst of production.

Not surprisingly, the years brought a steady drift from Calcutta to other centers, especially Bombay. Bimal Roy, Nitin Bose, Kidar Sharma, and others joined the Bombay migration. Barua, who had resisted the call of that "bazaar," died in 1951.

Since the beginning of the talking film era, Calcutta had not only supplied the needs of the Bengali-language market; it had also

<sup>60</sup> *BMPA Journal*, May, 1949.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, June, 1951.

taken a large share of the revenue from Hindi markets. It had obtained this share easily. It had simply produced films to its own taste, making Hindi versions along with Bengali versions, and watched the revenue come in. The profits from the Barua *Devdas* had come from many parts of India.

But in the postwar years Calcutta double versions ran into trouble. Between 1948 and 1955 New Theatres produced a number of double versions that succeeded in Bengali, but not in their Hindi versions. The Hindi titles were *Anjangarh* (*Anjangarh*), 1948; *Manzoor* (*Let It Be*), 1949; *Naya Safar* (*New Venture*), 1952; *Bakul* (*Bakul*), 1955.<sup>62</sup> Other producers were having similar experiences. For New Theatres, the setbacks virtually marked the end of the road.

Some said all this had happened because New Theatres, along with other Calcutta companies, had lost many talented men to Bombay. Others ascribed it to a change of tastes in the Hindi market.<sup>63</sup> Gemini Studios of Madras, with drum dances and thundering elephants, had caught the national fancy and brought forth a rash of epics. The quieter offerings of Calcutta were falling by the wayside.

To some it seemed that Calcutta would have to adjust itself to the new era and learn to produce "pageants for our peasants." Perhaps, like Madras, it would have to outbid Bombay for its stars, gambling for the highest stakes. Some moved in this direction, with minimal success. Calcutta simply did not have the *Chandrakekha* touch. But it turned out there was another possible direction. Calcutta had always been a city of international awareness. It was the city of Tagore, citizen of the world. And while some in Calcutta film circles saw as their only hope the Hindi-language markets of India, there were others who began to think in wider terms.

To describe the genesis of this thinking we must turn aside for a moment from the commercial film world of Calcutta to something that had struggled into precarious life at the moment of independence. It seemed for years to have no chance of surviving, yet something kept it stirring. It is important to our story not for what

<sup>62</sup> Interview, Pramanick.

<sup>63</sup> Interview, Sircar.

it was—a film society—but for the role it played in the education of several people.

### *Film society*

The Calcutta Film Society was founded in 1917, the year of independence, by Chidananda Das Gupta and Satyajit Ray. Both were advertising men. Both worked in the Calcutta branch of the London advertising agency D. J. Keymer. Both were hungry to see and study films other than those appearing in Calcutta theatres, and the Calcutta Film Society was founded for this purpose. It was not the first such society—a Bombay Film Society had been formed in 1942.

In India film societies worked from the start under crushing difficulties. In the United Kingdom the law exempted nonprofit membership film societies from censorship regulations. In the United States the few states that have censorship systems have likewise exempted nonprofit membership organizations. Without these exemptions the National Film Theatre in the United Kingdom, Cinema 16 and the Museum of Modern Art film showings in the United States—not to mention film societies on many university campuses—could hardly have been born and survived.

The Indian Cinematograph Act of 1918 and later amendments offered no such exemptions. Independent India retained the rigid restrictions of colonial India. No film society, university, school, museum, club, or business concern could show a film without submitting it for censorship.<sup>64</sup> The procedures were the same as for commercial theatre showings. After January, 1951, they included a fee of Rs. 40 per reel for films over 2,000 feet. A complete script, a synopsis in eight copies, and texts of songs in eight copies were needed.

<sup>64</sup> For a meeting of the Indian Academy of Sciences in Poona in 1949, a scientific film shot in the Arctic was flown to India. Held up for censorship, it reached the Academy meeting just in time for the scheduled screening. When the slide showing the censor's approval appeared on the screen, "Dr. Raman led the chorus of satiric approbation by lusty clapping of hands." *Journal of the Film Industry*, January, 1950. To date (1963) the law has not been changed.

For many of the experimental films shown at British and American film societies, no such material exists.

At the time of independence, Indian law exempted from censorship one kind of projection: a showing on diplomatic premises. This was to play an important role in the story of Indian film societies. In June, 1952, a second exemption was added. The rules now authorized a producer, without prior censorship, to project footage from his own unfinished film. Government representatives had to be admitted to any such screening at any time.<sup>65</sup> The new exemption did not help film societies.

Besides being subject to censorship, film societies had to pay entertainment taxes. This was another requirement from which British and American film societies have been exempt. Entertainment taxes continued to be levied on the Calcutta Film Society until 1960, when officials recognized it as an educational organization. But a new exemption application had to be made for each showing.<sup>66</sup>

Still another hurdle facing Indian film societies has been import duties. Foreign producers were sometimes willing to sell prints at low cost for nonprofit use in India, but the government took the position that import duty had to be paid. It long resisted the notion of classifying any feature films as educational material.

In spite of all these difficulties the Calcutta Film Society began in 1947 to hold regular showings of films of special interest as works of art. Membership rose steadily.

The society found it had, essentially, three sources of material. The first was the Central Film Library of the Ministry of Education. Formed as a service to schools, it had bought a few film classics such as *Nanook of the North*. But the emphasis in its purchases was on classroom teaching films. The Calcutta Film Society found it could obtain from the Central Film Library approximately twenty-five programs of film society interest. After that it had to rely on other sources.

A second source was the commercial distributor. Some had films, already censored but not widely distributed, available for rent to a

<sup>65</sup> *Journal of the Film Industry*, July, 1952.

<sup>66</sup> Interview, C. Das Gupta.

film society. Unexpected treasures were found, such as the French *Un Carnet de Bal*, rented from an American distributor under the title *Life Dances On*. However, in the early 1950s the period of censorship licenses was changed from ten years to five years.<sup>67</sup> Hundreds of old films became automatically uncertified—and had to be recensored, with payment of fees, even to be previewed by a film society executive. The change led many commercial distributors to destroy prints of old films to save storage costs. Thus it had the effect of curtailing this source of supply.

A third source consisted of foreign embassies. As other sources dried, this became all the more important, especially because an embassy sometimes invited the society to its premises to see a film, averting costs and red tape of censorship. Film societies became especially dependent on embassies representing countries with nationalized film industries. The USSR could make available such films as *Alexander Nevsky* and *Ivan the Terrible*, whereas the U.S. Information Service could offer no feature films but only documentaries on such topics as the New York Public Library or Concord, Massachusetts.

From these various sources the Calcutta Film Society, during the years 1947–52, showed films from the United States, the United Kingdom, the USSR, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Canada, Japan, and India itself. And it provided other valuable experience.

An early member of the Calcutta Film Society was Hari Das Gupta, a student at the University of Southern California in 1916–47. There he had met the French director Jean Renoir, who had come as a visiting lecturer. When Renoir later came to Calcutta to make *The River*, he turned to Hari Das Gupta for help, and eventually made him his assistant. Renoir spent months selecting locations. Sometimes Das Gupta, on these location-hunting jaunts, got Satyajit Ray to join them. Ray would take a long lunch period from the advertising agency, where he had become art director. He could talk endlessly—and beautifully—about Bengal and its people, and Renoir listened. Ray and Das Gupta learned from Renoir too. They were sometimes surprised at the familiar things that interested

<sup>67</sup> BMPA Journal, February, 1953.

Renoir and roused his enthusiasm and loving attention. Hari Das Gupta recalls, "We started seeing through his eyes."<sup>68</sup>

Renoir visited and talked to the members of the Calcutta Film Society. And there were others. When Pudovkin and Cherkasov visited India in 1951, they too met with the film devotees of the society. Later came John Huston and others.

From 1952 until 1956 the Calcutta Film Society suspended its activities. During that time its members talked unceasingly about reviving it, but the problems seemed formidable. In 1955 they learned, from the magazine *Indian Documentary*, that Bombay was having similar troubles:

The Bombay Film Society has been unable to present its regular monthly showing to members for the past two months, due to obstacles and delays put before it by the Home Department of the Bombay government. Difficulties of exhibition and censorship are one thing; equally discouraging is the difficulty of importing into India, in the first instance, films destined for non-commercial exhibition to small groups scattered throughout the country. These various problems require study and sorting out by some central body of determined and enthusiastic people, before any real progress in the film society movement can be expected.<sup>69</sup>

The Bombay society did not meet again for two years. Thus by 1955 both pioneer societies had come to a halt.

The Calcutta Film Society had meanwhile played a vital role in the lives of several people. Satyajit Ray was in production. So was Hari Das Gupta. They would be followed soon by Chidananda Das Gupta and others. But a chronicle of the troubles of the film societies raises a question. What did independent India gain by the obstacles it put in their path? Did India not gain more from the desperate efforts of the societies to continue, in spite of massive official discouragements?

<sup>68</sup> Interview, H. Das Gupta.

<sup>69</sup> *Indian Documentary, July-September, 1955.*

# *Feud*

We have briefly portrayed the three major film centers—Bombay, Madras, Calcutta—during the first postwar decade. Each had its own problems and was developing its own characteristics. But in some respects they were alike. During these years they shared a continuing feud with the government. Several aspects of this struggle need to be examined. One was the dispute over “approved” films. On both sides, this generated heat.

When independent India reintroduced the compulsory showing of “approved” films, various industry spokesmen denounced the action on principle. They said the central government had been “ill-advised by those trained under British bureaucracy,”<sup>1</sup> and argued that exhibitors would be willing to show documentary films and newsreels voluntarily. The record hardly supported them. After the termination of the *Indian News Parade* in 1946, a private Indian company had purchased its assets and tried to carry on the service. The effort had survived only a few months because exhibitors were uninterested.<sup>2</sup>

The industry spokesmen had apparently forgotten, or were unaware, that as early as 1937 the Motion Picture Society of India had itself urged the government to require exhibitors to show a minimum quota of educational film in each program, in the interest of “national culture.”<sup>3</sup> At that time producers clearly felt that some exercise of authority would be needed to create a market for what was considered essential, but had become unmarketable.

While continuing to object to compulsory showings,<sup>4</sup> industry

<sup>1</sup> *Journal of the Film Industry*, February, 1950.

<sup>2</sup> *Report of the Film Enquiry Committee*, p. 51.

<sup>3</sup> *Journal of the Motion Picture Society of India*, January, 1937.

<sup>4</sup> There was some litigation on the subject. In Madras State the requirement, as incorporated in theatre licenses in 1948, made it obligatory to show “not less than 2,000 feet of one or more approved films.” In 1954 the Madras State Court, in *Seshadri v. District Magistrate, Tanjore*, voided this on the ground that gov-

spokesmen also protested compulsory payments, as well as the scale of the payments. Exhibitors even argued that since the government paid newspapers for advertising space, it should pay theatres for documentary screentime, rather than require payments from them. The argument did not betray a high esteem for documentaries.

In 1951 the Film Enquiry Committee briefly considered the issue, and approved both the compulsion and the required payments. Meanwhile the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting took up the issue at various times in more detail.

Dr. B. V. Keskar, who became Minister of Information and Broadcasting in 1952, argued with some cogency that the required payments were a safeguard to the industry itself—necessary to protect the market for private producers. In December, 1954, he enlarged on this point in the Lok Sabha, the House of the People:

'The ultimate aim . . . is the development of the production of documentaries and newsreels by the Indian film industry. It has been acknowledged all over the world that documentaries, newsreels, and educational films must supplement the normal fare of entertainment given in the cinema houses and all the advanced countries have an established section of the film industry which produces films of this kind. . . . The only effective method of developing a documentary section in the film industry in India is to assure them a steady market, as no producer would otherwise be prepared to undertake the production of this kind of films which are essential to the community.<sup>5</sup>

Required showings with adequate payment, the minister said, were needed to create a market for documentary producers. If government began donating films of this sort to theatres, theatres would never again be willing to pay for them. The system of payments therefore protected the industry.

That its policies were designed to foster documentary film production in the private sector was a favorite theme of the ministry throughout these years. No other principle was so frequently reit-

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ernment, in the absence of a stated maximum, would be able to preempt all theatre screentime. The state then rewrote the clause to require the showing of not more than 2,000 feet of approved film; other states followed this example. The requirement has remained in effect in this form.

<sup>5</sup> *Lok Sabha Debates*, December 9, 1954.

erated. And yet there is no doubt that some of the actions of the ministry were at the same time having an exactly opposite effect.

When the obligation to show approved films had been reintroduced and the Films Division<sup>9</sup> of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting established, it sent representatives to cinemas throughout the country with a contract—ready for the signature of the exhibitor. It was a block-booking and blind-booking contract, under which the Films Division undertook to provide all the approved films the theatre would need to fulfill its legal obligations for the year, and the theatre committed itself to show them and to pay for them. Every cinema in the country felt it had no choice but to sign the “contracts which are described as agreements,” but which were “thrust by one party on the other.”<sup>10</sup>

It was certainly true that the government had created a market for documentary films and newsreels by making the showing of such material mandatory and requiring payments for it. It was also true that the government had, a moment later, completely preempted that market for its own products. Ministry spokesmen, in defense of their action, said that theatres were free to purchase additional documentaries from the private sector, but their faith in such voluntary action was hardly more convincing than the industry's own.

The ministry, in implementing the law, had in effect gone far beyond the law. In theory a theatre had to show an approved film either from the private sector or the public sector. The government had in 1949 set up a Film Advisory Board to review films and approve those that served a public purpose, whether produced by the Films Division or by others. In actuality the ministry, through its block-booking contract, had rewritten the obligation imposed on theatres. In every program, every theatre in India was now obligated by contract not merely to show an approved film but to show *an approved film from the Films Division*.

The gist of the situation was that a privately produced documentary, though approved by the Film Advisory Board, was unmarketable unless the Films Division itself chose to buy it, at its price, for its distribution. An independent documentary producer might

<sup>9</sup> BMPA Journal, June, 1949.

conceivably survive as a supplier to the Films Division, but he was prevented from being its competitor. Because of the contract, a theatre would never be in a position to make a choice between an approved film from the public sector<sup>7</sup> and an approved film from the private sector.

In answer to charges of monopolistic practices, Dr. Keskar, the Minister of Information and Broadcasting, offered in 1954 to negotiate a formula by which the preempted screentime would be divided with the private sector.<sup>7</sup> S. S. Vasan, as president of the Film Federation of India, rejected the idea of any such negotiations, so it is not clear what sort of arrangement the minister had in mind. The block-booking contract continued undisturbed.

The elimination or prevention of competition through block booking is a practice which India had known something about for decades. India was aware of the role it had played in consolidating the international position of the American producers after the First World War. It was aware of the role it had played in furthering their control over the American market. It is ironic that in the very year when block booking was outlawed in the United States by its Supreme Court, as the climax of an antimonopoly prosecution, independent India moved to create a closed production-distribution system through the same technique, but in a more thorough manner. Not a cinema in India remained outside the controlled market.

It should be emphasized that this controlled market in theatrical documentaries and newsreels was brought about *not* by the approved film plan, which envisaged competition, but by a contract for which there was no provision in the law. It was administration, not legislation, that created the monopoly.

Throughout this period the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting insisted that it was fostering the independent production of documentaries, and it apparently believed it was doing so. Not only did its Films Division occasionally buy a completed film on a lump-sum basis. It also had a policy of commissioning a few films each year to outside producers. Up to the end of 1954 six films had been commissioned in this way.<sup>8</sup> The practice would be expanded, the

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, November, 1954.

<sup>8</sup> *Lok Sabha Debates*, December 9, 1954.

ministry said. Each year the Films Division published a list of about two dozen approved independent producers who would be invited to submit competitive bids on film topics designated for outside production.

But the rates which the Films Division was willing to pay for the outside productions were a constant issue. This had erupted into public debate as early as 1950. By that year, according to industry estimates, the Films Division itself was spending Rs. 27 per foot in the production of staff-produced films. Yet it considered Rs. 12 per foot a proper price for private producers, except under extraordinary circumstances.<sup>9</sup> The negotiations on this subject were described as follows by the *BMPA Journal*:

The Ministry was originally prepared to pay only Rs. 8 to Rs. 15 per foot according to the quality of the documentary and even then for all the rights involved, viz., theatrical, nontheatrical, classroom, television, etc., whether in India or abroad. After prolonged discussions the Ministry offered a fixed payment of Rs. 12,000 per documentary, and the documentary producers accepted it as a minimum payable against delivery of the negative of a film, plus the residue from the exploitation of the film in the world's 35 mm and 16 mm markets, because at Rs. 12,000 the producers would make a loss which could be covered only in the manner suggested. This compares with . . . the average of Rs. 27,000 spent by the Films Division itself per reel. The Films Division does not accept the figure quoted for it, but it does not reveal its actual expenditure. . . . Up to date the Ministry has not accepted the offer of the private producers.<sup>10</sup>

It was apparently felt by the government that a governmental production agency needed to spend far more than a private producer to produce comparable material. It had, it frequently insisted, administrative costs. The negotiations collapsed and prices continued to be set mainly by competitive bidding. Exceptions were made only for an occasional "prestige" film; for *Gotama the Buddha*, marking the twenty-five-hundredth anniversary of the birth of the Buddha, a contract was made with Bimal Roy without competitive bids, at approximately twice the usual price-per-foot for outside productions. In most cases the independent producers were—in the words used by several—"encouraged to cut each oth-

<sup>9</sup> *BMPA Journal*, August, 1950.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

er's throats." Each year new names were added to the list of approved producers who were allowed to make bids, and other names dropped. Strenuous efforts among producers to organize a gentleman's agreement to put a floor under the bidding were frustrated by the eagerness of newcomers to break into production. Some producers spent several years on the list without winning a contract, but no doubt contributed to maintaining the low level of contract rates.

Fortunately for independent producers with documentary interests, there were occasional sponsors other than the government. In the early 1950s Burmah-Shell decided to launch a film department and engaged James Beveridge, previously of the National Film Board of Canada, to organize it. Under Beveridge, Burmah-Shell announced a policy of commissioning its films to Indian producers. Because of the notable work done under Shell auspices in other countries<sup>11</sup> the project aroused high hopes, and proceeded to justify them. Over a period of several years Burmah-Shell issued an impressive series of films including *Textiles*, directed by Paul Zils and winner of a 1956 Edinburgh film festival award; *Village in Travancore*, directed by Fali Billimoria and a winner at Edinburgh the following year; and *Panchtupi: A Village in West Bengal*, made by Hari Das Gupta—who had been assistant to Renoir on *The River*.

After this encouraging and even inspiring start, and amid indications of long-range planning, the Burmah-Shell film activity abruptly halted. The department was dissolved; James Beveridge left for home. No specific reason was given by Burmah-Shell, but various explanations were circulated. One was that Burmah-Shell had hoped for theatrical showing of some of its documentaries as approved films, but that Film Advisory Board policy had excluded consideration of any material carrying a commercial credit line, and that virtually no other distribution channels had been found available in India. Another explanation was that Burmah-Shell had been required by "government pressure"<sup>11</sup> to cut prices and public-relations expenditures. Another was that raw-film shortages were beginning to hamper the unit. In any event, the most encouraging

<sup>11</sup> *Indian Documentary, Festival Number, 1958.*

patron of the independent producer suddenly vanished from the film scene. At about the same time the United States Technical Co-operation Mission began to curtail its film production program, which had employed independent producers for several years. Documentary producers suddenly found that virtually the only source of employment was the Films Division, and that employment continued to be on a subsistence level, on competitive-bidding terms. In 1958 the *Statesman* aptly wondered whether the so-called independent producers should not properly be called "dependent producers."<sup>12</sup>

That year brought an atmosphere of crisis among these documentary producers. The magazine *Indian Documentary*, which had been their rallying center, titled an editorial: "IS IT FAREWELL TO DOCUMENTARIES?"<sup>13</sup> With the following issue it suspended publication.

It was not the end, however. There was some increase in the use of advertising films and slides in theatres, and some of the producers survived on these, between Films Division assignments. Occasional sponsors of public-relations films also continued to turn up. Hari Das Gupta, for example, began an ambitious film for Tata Steel Mills, with "script supervision by Satyajit Ray." A few states also sponsored occasional films. But these other sources of support were irregular or barren of incentive. For most documentary producers, best hope lay in having a place on the approved list of the one all-important patron, the Films Division, and doing its bidding, at its price, in its manner. In India the future of documentary film, as of newsreel, hung on the Films Division. The film of fact and the Films Division had become virtually synonymous.<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile, during these years of conflict, the Films Division had grown from humble beginnings to an organization of size and sub-

<sup>12</sup> *Statesman*, March 9, 1958.

<sup>13</sup> *Indian Documentary*, Festival Number, 1958.

<sup>14</sup> The Films Division's own publications seem to assume this. The brochure *Films Division* opens with these words: "The factual film plays a significant role in India today. It is the most effective medium for dissemination of information and education to the masses. Established in 1948, soon after Independence, Films Division is now one of the largest short film producing organisations in the world." *Films Division*, p. 3.

stance. It included in its ranks a number of interesting and talented people.

Here and there in the Indian film world are individuals who bridge decades of film history. Such a person is Ezra Mir. Born in Calcutta in 1902, he attended St. Xavier's College, had a brief fling at business with his father, then managed to get a foothold as an actor in Madan Theatres Ltd. In that same year, 1923, he held a winning ticket in the St. Leger Sweepstakes and found himself in possession of Rs. 8,000. He bought some new clothes and booked passage for the United States. Arriving in New York, he got a job as an extra with Rudolph Valentino, who was making *The Sainted Devil* in a studio on Long Island. This helped Ezra Mir get the rest of the way to Hollywood, his real destination. After a year and a half of unemployment, with only intermittent earnings at odd jobs, he won a place as assistant cutter at Universal Pictures Corporation, and found himself near the bottom of a vast hierarchy. Hearing that Mr. Laemmle, the man at the top of this hierarchy, was contemplating purchase of the Madan chain in India, he got word to Mr. Laemmle that a young Indian was available who had information on the Madan organization. Promptly Ezra Mir was spirited to the Laemmle sanctum. It turned out that Mir could not answer any of Mr. Laemmle's questions about Madan's capital investments, but Mir took the occasion to let Mr. Laemmle know, with overwhelming earnestness, that he wanted to be a writer, not a cutter. Almost casually, he was moved to the script department. Later Mir worked for other Hollywood companies and wrote treatments for Dolores Del Rio. Then the coming of sound brought upheaval. Mir stayed on for a while, then felt it would be wise to return to India. He arrived in time for the great Indian transformation to sound. In Calcutta he found Madan in rapid decline so he moved to Bombay. There he at once became The Man Who Had Been in Hollywood When It All Started. He became a director of sound films for Sagar and later Ranjit and others. When war came, his international background made him a logical candidate for Information Films of India. He became its chief producer. Years later, as successor to M. D. Bhavnani and J. Bhowmik, he stepped into a similar position with the Films Division of independent India.

With the title producer-in-charge, he became the artistic supervisor of a complex, rapidly growing apparatus.

Few organizations have faced a more staggering production task. With headquarters in Bombay, it began by making about 36 documentaries per year, but by the mid-1950s was making over 52 per year. From the start it maintained a pace of approximately 52 newsreels per year, and soon supplemented these with monthly "news magazines." It began by making each film in five languages—Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Telugu, English—but later added Kannada, Malayalam, Marathi, Gujarati, Punjabi, Oriya, Assamese, Kashmiri.<sup>15</sup> In 1951 it made 68 prints of each film but later increased the print order to 96 prints per film. It established a newsreel cameraman in every state and additional men in the large cities. With the assistance of the U.S. International Cooperation Administration it started a cartoon film division. In addition to making approved films for theatres it began to make special films for rural showings through mobile vans, on such topics as health, agricultural methods, planned parenthood; films for school use; and films for use at Indian missions abroad.

A meeting in New Delhi each year began the task of shaping an agenda for later months. At this meeting representatives of various ministries would meet with the Films Division to propose topics, review topics proposed by others, and classify them according to priority. Since the birth of the Films Division the overwhelming majority of topics has originated with ministries of the central government. A topic has usually had a ministry as its sponsor and has had a content consultant designated by the ministry. Even topics proposed by the Films Division itself, or by others, have been handled in this manner. Under the producer-in-charge and his deputy producer, the Films Division developed an echelon of assistant producers, each supervising several directors. A film ultimately became the task of a director—or, in some cases, of an outside producer. In most cases the staff director or outside producer has done the writing. At various stages he would have to check with the assistant

<sup>15</sup> In 1960 "simple Urdu" replaced Kashmiri as state language of Kashmir.

producer, who in turn might check with the deputy producer or producer-in-charge, who might check with the ministry consultant. At several prescribed stages—script, edited workprint, test print—there would be meetings of director, assistant producer, deputy producer, producer-in-charge, and ministry consultant, to review, negotiate, correct, approve, or reject. A four-month production cycle became normal.

That an apparatus of such size, and with diplomatic proceedings so exacting, should function at all and meet its schedules is in itself remarkable. That its procedures should impose on the films a characteristic Films Division pattern and style is not surprising. From the very beginnings of the system, the films were under the control of ministry representatives with little or no film background. Some were men of considerable education, products of a highly verbalized culture. To them it was, quite naturally, the words in the narration that counted. The pictures—subsidiary, in their view—that would accompany those words could safely be left to others. The typical Films Division film has had constant narration, crowded with information. If the facts were there, embedded in the words, the consultant would usually feel his mission had been achieved.

The problem of producing each film in numerous languages has contributed to the overemphasis on narration. Inevitably, dialogue has been discouraged. Tensions and sensitivities over language have also contributed to the narrative fixation. Although Nehru and other ministers have appeared constantly in Films Division films—both in documentaries and in newsreels—they have been *seen* talking, seldom *heard*. The inevitable voice-over narrator has supplied the gist of things said, in any of thirteen languages. The status of the ministers as national symbols has been preserved by keeping them as silent, lip-wagging mysteries.

The Films Division, in its distribution, has tried to follow the policy of matching the language of the documentary or newsreel to the language of the scheduled feature. A Telugu feature would generally be joined by a Telugu documentary or newsreel. With features in circulation in numerous languages, the logistics problems involved in such a policy have been considerable.



*Radha and Krishna*, 1957. FILMS DIVISION PRODUCTION USING HISTORIC ART

*This Our India*, 1961. FILMS DIVISION CARTOON FILM





*Pilot Project*, 1962. FILMS DIVISION DOCUMENTARY ON MODERNIZATION  
OF RIVER TRANSPORT

Ironically, English became and remained the operating language of the Films Division. After approval in its English form, a narration would be translated into the official Indian languages. In some of the Indian versions, it was found that the narration might run longer than in English. An informal rule therefore developed: the English narration must not use more than 80 percent of the available time. It has seldom used less.

With all these operational handicaps, the Films Division yet developed during the 1950s into an organization commanding respect. Its films were modest and factual in manner and well photographed. In international festivals they began to win "certificates of merit" and occasional other awards. At the 1951 documentary film festival at Venice, *Jaipur* (Jaipur) won a First Prize. At the 1956 festival of documentary and experimental films in Montevideo, *Symphony of Life* won a First Prize. At the Manila festival in the

same year, *Khajuraho* (Khajuraho) won a Silver Carabao for "cultural values." The following year at Cannes, *Gotama the Buddha* was cited for "exceptional moral and artistic beauty."<sup>16</sup>

To be sure, the films continued to be a target for frequent criticism at home. One complaint was that too large a proportion of newsreel items involved activities of cabinet members—cutting ribbons, laying cornerstones. No doubt this was partly a result of the readiness of ministers to cut ribbons and lay cornerstones. Another charge was that this predilection for the activities of cabinet members favored the party in power. Yet it was hardly up to the Films Division to avoid cabinet members in deference to defeated parties. The films were also criticized for stodginess and sameness of manner. The biographical films were criticized for a tendency to sweep controversial issues under the rug.<sup>17</sup>

Yet with all these problems and criticisms, the Films Division was accomplishing something. The Film Enquiry Committee, in 1951, did not find audiences as hostile as exhibitors had claimed. The documentaries and newsreels were opening the eyes of filmgoers to many phases of the development of their country, and to the huge tasks facing it. The films on Indian sculptures and cave paintings were acquainting them with an artistic heritage which, to astonishing numbers of Indians, had long been a closed book. The geographical films were showing them parts of their own country which they had never seen and which, a few years before, they had not known existed.

The Films Division represented the first step of the government of independent India in "public-sector" film enterprise. Under the Indian five-year plans, the ultimate aim is a socialist economy. Certain basic fields have been allocated entirely and immediately to the public sector. In others, "private-sector" enterprise has been encouraged to continue, although "public-sector" enterprise may also be undertaken. Still others have been left largely to private initiative.

<sup>16</sup> *Films Division*, pp. 14-12.

<sup>17</sup> In a biographical film on the nationalist leader Lokmanya Tilak, for example, his disagreements with Gandhi were completely ignored, and the viewer left with an impression of complete harmony in the independence movement—an example of the hazards of official biographies.

The inauguration of the Films Division placed the film medium in the middle category. A few years later the government decided on a second step in public-sector film activity. The Film Enquiry Committee had found an almost complete absence of films serving the needs of children and had urged the film industry to consider those needs. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, in its 1954–55 *Report*, announced the decision of the government to "promote the formation of a Children's Film Society.<sup>18</sup> It was launched in 1955 as a quasi-independent corporation and was provided with government funds to produce and distribute children's films.

The government envisaged other possible steps in public-sector film enterprise. In 1955 Prime Minister Nehru addressed a seminar of leading film artists, held in New Delhi under the auspices of the Sangeet Natak Akademi (Academy of Music, Dance, and Drama). It was the first time the government had convoked a group of film makers in a "cultural" context. The seminar was conducted under the guidance of Devika Rani, who emerged from private life for the unusual occasion.

The Prime Minister described the film medium as a "tremendous thing," with an influence in India "greater than the influence of newspapers and books all combined" (CHEERS), but quipped: "I am not at the moment talking about the quality of the influence" (LAUGHTER). He then told the assembled film makers, all from the private sector, that the government would be "likely to compete with private ventures in films." He felt that "the result might be a setting up of standards by a certain measure of competition."<sup>19</sup>

This comment raises the question of whether "a certain measure of competition" might not also have been beneficial to the Films Division, an organization serving a controlled documentary market. The Prime Minister may not have been aware of how firmly his government had moved to avert the development of private competition in this field.

The central instrument of those moves had been the block-book- ing contract imposed on theatres soon after independence. Seldom has a contract conferred firmer control. Illustrative of this is the

<sup>18</sup> *Report, 1954–55*, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> *Film Seminar Report*, pp. 13–15.

curious arbitration clause of the contract. In the event of any dispute between the government—the “distributor”—and the party of the second part—the “exhibitor”—the contract provided that the dispute would be “referred to the sole arbitration of the Secretary, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India,” or anyone designated by him. Apparently aware that exhibitors might consider this a one-sided arrangement, the contract added: “No objection shall be taken to any such reference on the ground that the person so appointed is a servant under the Distributor and has to deal with the matter in the course of normal duties.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, all disputes would be settled by the government.

By the end of its first decade the Films Division had grown into an organization of over five hundred employees, with its own compound, its own group of buildings, its own nationwide distributing organization. It had become one of the few elements of stability in the Indian film world. Most of its technicians, while low-paid, had a slightly higher level of pay than comparable workers in the private sector,<sup>21</sup> and had in addition a measure of security. Under the leadership of the patient, ever-diplomatic Ezra Mir, producer-in-charge, the Films Division was winning the strong confidence and support of government. An air of assurance was beginning to surround the organization.

In 1957 the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting decided on a new move. In the chief cities it would inaugurate special theatres showing exclusively government documentaries and newsreels, for a very low admission charge. The first such venture was the Films Division Auditorium in the heart of New Delhi, opened in 1957, with an admission price of Re. 0.25. It was the ministry's first cautious move to test the independent box-office attraction of its productions, so long deprecated by exhibitors. The small auditorium was opened with appropriate ceremony by R. K. Ramadhyani, Secretary of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting—later presidential secretary. Ramadhyani stated: “In this auditorium it is

<sup>20</sup> *Agreement*, p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> *Report of an Enquiry into the Conditions of Labour*, p. 49.

proposed to have two shows of films, one in the forenoon and one in the afternoon, of about one hour each. Depending on the demand, the number of shows may be suitably increased."<sup>22</sup> The resulting attendance almost immediately caused the number of shows to be "suitably" decreased. The forenoon showings were dropped entirely. Monday showings were eliminated. Sunday shows were lengthened to two hours. In a city of a million, capital of the nation, the official documentaries could hardly draw a thousand people in a week.

As early as 1950 the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting was estimating that its documentaries were being seen by 15 million people.<sup>23</sup> Its auditorium venture, though described in an official report as "very popular,"<sup>24</sup> must have shown the ministry how dependent it was for its mass audience on an industry whose products it heartily disliked. If each of the documentaries was reaching 15,000,000 people, it was doing so as a hitchhiker, riding with feature films. But this strong dependence of the public sector on the private sector was not likely to increase the affection between them—as we shall see.

### *There are other kinds of music*

When Dr. Keskar—Balkrishna Vishwanath Keskar, D. Litt.—became Minister of Information and Broadcasting in 1952, he acquired responsibility for a number of government agencies dealing with the mass media. They included among others the Films Division, the Central Board of Film Censors, the Mobile Units, the Publications Division, the Press Information Bureau, and the entire broadcasting chain known as A.I.R.—All India Radio.

Dr. Keskar had not had experience in any of these media, but he brought to his task an impressive record. Educated at Poona, Hy-

<sup>22</sup> Ramadhyani, *Essays and Addresses*, p. 206.

<sup>23</sup> Statement by R. R. Diwakar, quoted in *Journal of the Film Industry*, January, 1950.

<sup>24</sup> *Report, 1959–60*, p. 20.

derabad, Banaras, and Paris, he had long been prominent in the councils of the Indian National Congress. In 1946 he had been a member of India's Constituent Assembly. In the same year he was appointed Deputy Minister of External Affairs. In 1950 he served on the Indian delegation to the United Nations. Two years later he became Minister of Information and Broadcasting.

He had always been a devotee of Indian classical music, and this gave him an immediate special interest in All India Radio, which he envisaged playing a prominent role in a revival of Indian classical culture—especially its music.

In relation to the film industry Dr. Keskar seemed less at ease, but he soon began to make official appearances at film functions. On these occasions he generally wore the *chudidar*, the tight pants worn by many Congress leaders, along with the *sharwani* or long coat. In this native garb, his thin figure had an ascetic look in almost any film gathering.

Film makers soon learned that Dr. Keskar had many misgivings about film and the film industry and would be frank about them, whenever asked to speak. Soon after taking office he told a conference of producers: "Producers in this line should have a certain background of culture. . . . At present there is hardly any standard maintained by many of the productions we see on the screen."<sup>25</sup> A few months later, at a tea party given for him by the Bengal Motion Picture Association, he told the gathering: "My experience of the film industry has been that a large part of it is not conscious of its proper functions, although I know that there must be many at the same time who are."<sup>26</sup>

Meanwhile, on several occasions, Dr. Keskar had criticized film songs, and had already made policy decisions that reflected his feelings about them. In July, 1952, the *Journal of the Film Industry* carried the news that All India Radio would reduce the time given to film songs.<sup>27</sup> Dr. Keskar had also decided to end the long-standing practice of mentioning the titles of films from which the songs came.

<sup>25</sup> *BMPA Journal*, July–August, 1952.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, May, 1953.

<sup>27</sup> *Journal of the Film Industry*, July, 1952.

He would permit the name of the singer, but the name of the film would be considered "advertising," and disallowed. Dr. Keskar did not heed the angry protests of the producers—who were the copyright owners—with the result that they decided to discontinue the performing licenses under which All India Radio had been broadcasting film songs. Thus film music abruptly disappeared from all transmitters in India.

This sudden purification of the airwaves was, to many devotees of Indian classical music, a major event and a triumph, for which Dr. Keskar was warmly praised. For they regarded film music not only as an abomination but as a threat to a sacred cause—the survival of classical music.

Their feelings on this subject touched on many issues, but began with that of instrumentation. The use in film songs of such instruments as the piano, harmonium, vibraphone, xylophone, and saxophone involved adoption of the Western tempered scale. This, it was felt, was rapidly blunting Indian ears to the nuances of traditional Indian music. During the 1955 Film Seminar—also addressed by Nehru—this point was discussed by R. Ranjan, a prominent actor, dancer, and musician, and director of a school of music and dancing in Madras:

With the adoption of the tempered scale of the west, our musicians become oblivious of the delicacies and subtleties of the 22-sruti scale. . . . What gives eternal strength and charm to Indian music is its immense potentiality for delicate touches by the use of the 22-sruti sc.<sup>28</sup>

For this reason, he felt, the survival of Indian music required drastic action. Moves against film music were only a part of what was needed. He called for official steps to "popularize correct ideas" about musical scales and instruments and to "ban the use of the harmonium and other keyboard instruments from all schools, col-

<sup>28</sup> *Film Seminar Report*, p. 155. The use of quarter tones and microtones is a distinctive feature of Indian classical music. Twenty-two such notes or *srutis* (ten notes in addition to the universal twelve sets 'ones) have been the foundation of the Indian musical scale. In brief, the octave is divided into twenty-two unequal intervals.

leges and dance institutions."<sup>29</sup> He was willing that the violin should stay; it placed no limit on nuances and, moreover, its origin had been traced to India. But the rest "must vanish immediately."<sup>30</sup> Then there could be "a concord of sweet sound . . . which would entrance our inner spirit."<sup>31</sup>

Such feelings were all part of the larger crusade—so important to Dr. Keskar—on behalf of Indian classical music. Under him more than 50 percent of all broadcast music came to be Indian classical music. Indian folk music, played in traditional styles, became another large classification. All India Radio accumulated a list of "over 7,000 approved classical music artists,"<sup>32</sup> who were to make intermittent appearances, and each year the list was increased. In a talk broadcast in January, 1957, Dr. Keskar reviewed the efforts made:

The object is to encourage the revival of our traditional music, classical and folk. Both were in a state of decay and somnolence. It is obvious that music, which formerly flourished on account of royal and princely patronage, will not revive and flourish unless the State can extend to them the same or extended patronage. The Radio is fulfilling that task for the nation and I can say with satisfaction that it has become the greatest patron of Indian music and musicians, greater than all the princely and munificent patronage of former days.<sup>33</sup>

All India Radio was acclaimed by many as the savior of Indian classical music. It was largely in the regime of Dr. Keskar that it won this name.

One of the functions of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, of which All India Radio is a part, has been to serve as a "link between the Government and the people." One of its tasks, in the era of newly won freedom, was to "rouse in the common man a new sense of urgency and duty to the community."<sup>34</sup> In the film medium, the ministry had the Films Division for this task; in the radio medium, All India Radio. But in the latter case the entire system, including all transmitters and programing, was controlled

<sup>29</sup> *Film Seminar Report*, p. 155.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.      <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>32</sup> *Report, 1956-57*, p. 69.      <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Report, 1954-55*, p. 1.

by the ministry. For radio in India had been nationalized under the British as early as 1930 and had been built up in the image of the British Broadcasting Corporation. With the coming of independence, it naturally remained in the "public sector."

At that time—August, 1947—All India Radio had six stations and less than a quarter of a million licensed listeners.<sup>35</sup> The small size of the following was accepted as natural in view of the close identification the system had had with British rule. Its prewar Director-General, Lionel Fielden of the British Broadcasting Corporation, had himself described his four years of strenuous effort as "enough to make a cat laugh. It was the biggest flop of all time."<sup>36</sup>

But independent India foresaw a major role for radio in the era of national transformation, and embarked on an A.I.R. Development Plan designed to make the system "available to a population of about 220 millions"<sup>37</sup> out of India's four hundred million. The first decade of freedom saw a substantial expansion of the facilities. By January, 1957, the six stations had grown to 28 stations, offering primary coverage to most of the nation. All major language groups were being served. The expansion had been accompanied by government drives to promote the sale of radio sets. But with all these efforts the number of licensed sets had grown, by October, 1956, to only 1,128,599.<sup>38</sup> Only a small proportion of these were community receivers. Most of India's population was still untouched by radio. Dismaying as the statistics were, still more discouraging was the fact that most of the existing sets were tuned regularly—especially in the late afternoons and early evenings—to Radio Ceylon.

The exact dimensions of this problem were not made clear. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting itself made an audience study during this period,<sup>39</sup> but declined to reveal its findings. Five years later inquirers were still told by the ministry that the study

<sup>35</sup> *Report, 1956-57*, p. 24.

<sup>36</sup> Fielden, *The Natural Bent*, p. 204.

<sup>37</sup> *Report, 1954-55*, p. 1.

<sup>38</sup> *Report, 1956-57*, p. 26.

<sup>39</sup> *Report, 1957-58*, p. 21.

was not "public information."<sup>40</sup> Meanwhile less formal checks by foreign broadcasters and commercial advertisers indicated that the commercial short-wave service of Radio Ceylon, with a schedule consisting solely of Indian film songs and advertising, dominated the air over India at peak hours.

Dr. Keskar tried to minimize the issues raised by film songs and the rise of Radio Ceylon. In October, 1954, he was quoted as declaring that "except for raw and immature people like children and adolescents,"<sup>41</sup> householders in general detested film music.

Light was later thrown on the situation by UNESCO, which gathered and tabulated statistics on radio sets in various countries "around 1958." These figures showed:<sup>42</sup>

Radio sets per 1,000 inhabitants		Radio sets per 1,000 inhabitants	
Japan	158	Laos	7
Ceylon	25	India	4
Indonesia	7		

When All India Radio had launched its drive for the "revival of our traditional music," there was no thought that this might conceivably limit the network's role as "link between the Government and the people." Yet indications were that this had happened.

Naushad Ali, a leading music director for films, responsible for a number of the most successful film songs, offered an explanation. Referring particularly to north Indian classical music, he wrote:

Classical sangeet has never been the art of the masses. It was first born in the sacred temples and later flourished in the glamorous courts of the Rajas, Maharajas and the Nawabs. . . . The common people who had no access to the great durbars were never offered the opportunity of listening to classical music. They could not, therefore, acquire an appreciative ear for it.<sup>43</sup>

The attempt to make this highly specialized music a part of the everyday environment of millions was, to Naushad Ali, an artificial imposition. The music had been in the first instance the preoccupation of small elite groups, who took special pride in its mysteries. To many millions of Indians it was almost as remote as the music

<sup>40</sup> Interview, Bhaji.      <sup>41</sup> *BMPA Journal*, October, 1954.

<sup>42</sup> *Developing Mass Media of Asia*, p. 59.

<sup>43</sup> *Indian Talkie*, 1931-56, p. 99.

of British string ensembles. In the view of Naushad Ali, film music—a spontaneous and exuberant growth, emerging from an older folk music and adapting itself to a new era and its influences—was the real folk music of modern India.

Throughout these years of debate, the uncompromising level of All India Radio's programing had a magnificence of its own. It introduced as an annual event a National Symposium of Poets—something few nations would attempt. It regularly broadcast readings in Sanskrit, a language spoken, according to government statistics, by 555 people.<sup>44</sup> It organized a Music Symposium in which musicologists discussed such topics as “the Evolution of Dhruvapada in Hindustani Music” and “The Evolution of Kritis in Karnataka Music.” The National Programme of Talks, broadcast over all stations, offered such subjects as “Modern Prose and Traditional Sanskrit Style,” “Adequacy of Indian Prose for Contemporary Needs of Expression,” and “Intellectual Life in Pre-British India.” Current controversy was shunned; the 1956-57 *Report* mentioned with apparent satisfaction that “controversial party broadcasts have again been avoided.” However, the Chief Election Commissioner delivered three national talks on “the desirability of maintaining law and order during the elections and the duties of public servants in connection with the elections.”<sup>45</sup>

Despite its generally unflinching performance, it was not a great surprise when All India Radio in 1957 took a step in a different direction. This move had to do, in part, with film songs. The film producers had already renewed the performance lines of All India Radio. This was now followed, with as much fanfare as the situation allowed, by the inauguration of a new service, “a landmark in the history of All India Radio.” Over two powerful short-wave stations from Bombay and Madras, blanketing the nation, India began a continuous offering of “popular music and light entertainment.” Portions of it were also to be rebroadcast, at various times of the day, over the regional medium-wave stations. The ministry made it clear that the new service would not offer *only* film music. There were, it was emphasized, other kinds of music. But film

<sup>44</sup> *India, 1961*, p. 23.

<sup>45</sup> *Report, 1956-57*, p. 17.

songs "approved by the Screening Committees" would be used, and "adequate allocation of time for film music has been made at each station."<sup>46</sup> The raw and immature, the adolescent and the child, were being invited back.

### *For the mass of the people*

Throughout the struggles over film songs and documentary films, there was also conflict over censorship.

The determination to cleanse India of corrupting Western influences was a force in this conflict, as in the struggle over film music. The impulse showed itself in a variety of ways, including a determination to enforce stricter decorum in manners and dress. Although kisses, even between Indians, had occasionally been permitted in the 1930s—the royal lovers in *Karma* kissed several times—kissing became more strictly taboo after independence. For a while this taboo was enforced even in foreign films. Indians became accustomed to strange jumps in such films. A shot of lips approaching would be abruptly followed by a shot of lips withdrawing. Similarly, in a drinking sequence, a hand lifting a glass from a table would be abruptly followed by the hand replacing the glass on the table.

The absurdity of such effects led to occasional relaxation of standards for foreign films. This was rationalized on the ground that drinking and public kissing were customary among foreigners, and also on the ground that foreign films were now shown regularly in only a few dozen theatres, reaching only a relatively sophisticated segment of Indian society. This double censorship standard was always sharply criticized by Indian producers. The *BMPA Journal* complained bitterly: "Differential treatment to Indians and Englishmen had been the fate of India under British rule. Codes of treatment of one and the other in almost every sphere used to be different."<sup>47</sup> The *BMPA Journal* considered it scandalous that independent India should continue discriminatory practices. Ministry spokesmen were thus periodically pushed into promising equal treatment for all—which meant, in effect, equally harsh treatment for foreign as for Indian films. But strict adherence to this policy was found to be difficult.

<sup>1</sup> *Report, 1957-58*, p. 9.

<sup>47</sup> *BMPA Journal*, May, 1950.

Although censorship in India was probably already more severe than that in any other leading film-producing nation, officialdom was under constant pressure to intensify rather than ease it. At virtually all sessions of the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha, the two houses of the Indian parliament, members requested the Minister of Information and Broadcasting to pledge renewed effort to purge the film industry of unwholesome influences. A leader in these demands was Mrs. Lilavati Munshi, wife of the lawyer, author, and statesman K. M. Munshi. A member of the Rajya Sabha, she was also a constant letter writer and speaker in the cause of stricter censorship, and eventually formed a Society for the Prevention of Unhealthy Trends in Motion Pictures. She attacked the American and Indian film industries with equal indignation:

There is hardly any Hollywood picture that does not show long and passionate kisses and hardly any Indian picture without a boy running after a girl. The dances are all so designed as to excite the lower instinct lurking in every human being. Newspapers and journals too give colourful stories about cinema stars to boost circulation. Some of them print pin-up girls to be viewed by impressionable adults. As a result, many young people leave their homes dreaming to become cinema stars. This disease is widespread even among very young boys.<sup>48</sup>

She addressed a letter to "Mrs. Mamie Eisenhower, White House, Washington, D.C." to tell her that some Hollywood films, not specifically identified, "come to India and ruin the moral fibre of our younger generations." If Mrs. Eisenhower could "stop the production of such Hollywood films," Mrs. Munshi told her, it would surely be "one of the monumental acts" of the Eisenhower presidency.<sup>49</sup>

Indian producers were vaguely aware that film interests in the United States had reduced censorship interference by appeals through the courts, based on constitutional guarantees. A few such efforts were made in India, but without success. The efforts led Dr. Keskar to warn producers: "I would warn the industry not to run after the mirage of getting asserted a particular right by legal means."<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Report of the Society for the Prevention of Unhealthy Trends in Motion Pictures, No. 1, p. 9.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., No. 2, pp. 12-13.      <sup>50</sup> Quoted in BAPMA Journal, July-August, 1952.

The hope of successful anticensorship litigation did indeed appear to be a mirage. The legal framework within which censorship was operating in India differed sharply from that in effect in the United States. In the latter, governmental powers were circumscribed, soon after adoption of the federal Constitution, by guarantees of the Bill of Rights, including the First Amendment guarantee of freedom of the press. This guarantee, broadened by judicial interpretation to include film and broadcasting, has been a sort of Magna Charta of the media of expression. In the Republic of India the Constitution likewise acquired, soon after its adoption, a First Amendment dealing with censorship, but its effect was the opposite: it was a Magna Charta for the censor. The Constitution itself, in its Article 19, had established "the right to freedom of speech and expression." India's First Amendment, adopted in 1951, whittled this down by authorizing parliament to enact "reasonable restrictions" on the freedom of speech and expression "in the interests of the security of the State, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, decency or morality, or in relation to contempt of court, defamation or incitement to an offence." Thus censorship in India acquired a firm, explicit constitutional base, which has given the government censorship powers almost impossible to challenge. A court could presumably interfere only on the ground that a restriction was "unreasonable." To date there have been no court actions of this sort.

Operating on firm constitutional grounds, the Indian censors have proceeded with a sense of assurance. The Central Board of Film Censors, which began functioning on January 15, 1951, has provided its examining committees with instructions that comprise a sort of code, listing types of material that may be grounds for censorship action. Issued in November, 1952, and subsequently revised from time to time, the list has retained items that date from colonial days of the 1920s, such as taboos on "excessively passionate love scenes," "indelicate sexual situations," "unnecessary exhibition of feminine underclothing," "indecorous dancing," "realistic horrors of warfare," "exploitation of tragic incidents of war," "blackmail associated with immorality," "intimate biological studies," "gross travesties of the administration of justice," as well as material likely

to promote "disaffection or resistance to Government." Other items of a previous era, such as "scenes holding up the King's uniform to contempt and ridicule," have necessarily disappeared, although in a sense they were retained in broader form in a taboo on material likely to "wound the susceptibilities of any foreign nation." The new directives also borrowed from the Hollywood Production Code, as in the prefatory General Principles banning any film "which will lower the moral standards of those who see it."<sup>51</sup>

While the full range of authorized and proclaimed grounds for censorship appears to have been used by Indian censors, their actions seem, like literary trends, to have run in cycles. An obsession of the mid-1950s was described as follows by the *BMPA Journal*:

Censorship in India is fast becoming a censorship of the female anatomy with the emphasis currently in vogue on cutting "Emphasized bosom" of heroines in some of our pictures. We deplore any attempt on the part of anyone to exploit the lower emotions of man but we cannot agree that the female anatomy should be tampered with to please the neo-moralist, that is the Indian film censor. We do not know whether there has been any new directive to the censor which is kept before the mind's eye while examining pictures for certification. The common boy or girl does not pay as much attention to the dress or contour of a woman as the censors do.<sup>52</sup>

The editorial was referring to censorship orders of the following sort. For the Hindi film *Dara* (*Dara*):

Delete. . . . Mid-close and close shots showing Usha with emphasized bust when she is on a jeep, as she jumps down, as she runs face to camera.

For the Telugu film *Pempudu Koduku* (*Foster Child*):

Delete . . . the close-up of Sundai's busts when she is lying dead on the bed.

For the Tamil *Manitanum Mrigamum* (*Man and Beast*):

Reduce close-ups and side-shots of Kamala's busts in the second dance.

For the Hindi *Gunehgar* (*Gunehgar*):

Delete. . . . Close view of bust of Sarla as she is lying on back in the gangster's den.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>51</sup> *Indian Motion Picture Almanac and Who's Who*, 1953, p. 215.

<sup>52</sup> *BMPA Journal*, November, 1954.      <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

A particularly arbitrary aspect of Indian censorship, after independence as before it, has been the sudden reversal—the abrupt un-certification of a film already approved and in distribution, and for which heavy promotion expenses may have been made. Thus in 1956 a number of feature films dealing with Africa, all of which seemed harmless to the censors when first reviewed, were suddenly uncertified. National susceptibilities, conveyed through informal diplomacy, appear to have been involved. The films included *The African Queen*, *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, *Untamed*, *Tanganyika*, *African Adventure*, and *Below the Sahara*. The official explanation was that they "fail to portray the people of Africa in proper perspective."<sup>54</sup> A similar action was taken in regard to *The King and I*. Producers, distributors, and exhibitors felt they had no recourse against such reversals.

On the subject of censorship, as on other phases of the government-industry feud, protests and discussions accomplished little, and often only led to increased irritation on both sides. To the industry the censors were, by and large, bureaucrats intent on being as arbitrary as their British predecessors, and often more bigoted in their decisions. To many government people, the industry was an agglomeration of irresponsible, fly-by-night units, whose works seemed irrelevant to the great tasks of independence, who were intent on making money by the exploitation of sex and sensation, and who deserved to be dealt with firmly on moral questions—and taxed as severely as possible.

Dr. Keskar, in his appearances at film conventions, usually defended the need for strict censorship, and did so in terms which were especially irksome to film producers. He defended strict censorship as the will of the people, an expression of democracy. He appeared as champion of the popular will:

Films in Indian languages are meant for and seen by the mass of the people, most of whom are not educated. . . . Now, the mass in any country is to some extent conventional, has certain prejudices that cannot be helped. An intellectual or educated audience can forgive or even appreciate unconventional themes or ideas put on the screen. The same cannot be said of the bulk of the people. I am afraid this fact is conveniently forgotten. . . .

<sup>54</sup> *Statesman*, May 5, 1956.

Unfortunately government cannot forget it because it is elected by the mass of the people and it has to take into consideration their feelings and sentiments.<sup>55</sup>

That Dr. Keskar, whose radio policies were facilitating the rise of Radio Ceylon, should be interpreting for film producers the "feelings and sentiments" of the masses seemed to producers particularly absurd and outrageous. They were hardly willing to accept him as interpreter and champion of the will of the people, even of its prejudices.

Approved films, film songs, censorship, taxes. In these and other areas of dispute—to some extent surface manifestations of a struggle between private and public enterprise—industry and government exchanged argument and challenge throughout the first decade of independence. To judge from trade publications, this feuding was the chief preoccupation of the world of film. Fortunately it was not.

Throughout the decade men were making films. Each year some three hundred films emerged on Indian screens. As had been the case each year since the Second World War, the three hundred films represented almost as many different producers. As had been the case in each of those years, the almost three hundred producers involved scores of newcomers—often called "adventurers." Among those who made their debut in the mid-1950s was Satyajit Ray, of Calcutta.

## *Wide World*

Like many of those called adventurers, Satyajit Ray (1921— ) began his first film with only a fraction of the funds needed to finish it. And like many, he began without any film production experience, either as cameraman, director, producer, performer, or assistant of any sort. Yet there had been a preparation.

Satyajit Ray was born into an extraordinarily gifted family. His father, Sukumar Ray, was a prominent Bengali writer as well as a

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in *BMPA Journal*, July-August, 1952.

painter and "master of the photographic art." He also founded a children's magazine for which he wrote many nonsense verses "which have come to stay as permanent stock in our juvenile literature."<sup>1</sup> He printed this magazine on his own printing press and did illustrations for it. Satyajit Ray's grandfather, Upendrakishor Ray, had also been a writer and a compiler of "one of the best books of nursery tales in Bengali."<sup>2</sup> In addition, he was a violinist, a pioneer in halftone block printing in India, and a friend of Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore came frequently to the Ray home.

Sukumar Ray died in 1923, when his son Satyajit was only two years old. The printing press which Sukumar Ray had operated for twenty years had to be abandoned, and the family faced a time of financial stress. Satyajit grew up in the home of his maternal uncle, while his mother taught embroidery and leatherwork in a home for widows. Under these circumstances Satyajit completed his schooling. The financial troubles may help to explain why, at college, he took up the study of economics, in which at nineteen he earned a B.A. from the University of Calcutta.

Rabindranath Tagore had long taken an interest in Satyajit, urging his mother to let him study at Santiniketan. As a result he went there in 1940 for further studies under Tagore, staying until 1942. Tagore, who had influenced almost all the arts of modern India, died in 1941.

Santiniketan represented resistance to the traditions of rote learning. Here the emphasis was on development from within. The plan included daily meditations and group meetings outdoors in a garden atmosphere. At Santiniketan Satyajit Ray concentrated on study of the graphic arts.

In 1943, at twenty-two, he entered the Calcutta branch of D. J. Keymer, a British-owned advertising agency, to earn his living as an advertising artist. Four years later he became art director of the branch.

<sup>1</sup> Sen, *History of Bengali Literature*, p. 341.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

### *Young man with a script*

Throughout his years of study he had been an ardent filmgoer. In his teens he had already selected films according to their directors rather than their stars. He wanted to see films directed by John Ford, Ernst Lubitsch, William Wyler. He also read every available book about film, including works of Eisenstein and Pudovkin. He studied the scripts in *Twenty Best Film Plays*, the 1943 anthology compiled by John Gassner and Dudley Nichols. On a few occasions he watched his cousin, Nitin Bose, direct at New Theatres. In 1947, the year of independence, Satyajit Ray and Chidananda Das Gupta founded the Calcutta Film Society largely as a vehicle for continued, intensive study of film.

Satyajit Ray already harbored thoughts of film production and for some time pursued an exacting method of training. When a film adaptation of a well-known work was about to appear, he would study the book and write a complete film script. Watching the produced film, he compared it inwardly with his own version, noting opportunities he might have missed and matters on which he would have improved on the produced film. By this technique he gained knowledge of his medium—and mounting confidence in himself.

In 1950 the Keymer advertising agency decided to send him to London for a period of study and training at the head office. The trip also proved an extraordinary opportunity to see films. In London he saw new and old films of many lands, not available in India, and became especially excited over the work of De Sica, Visconti, and other Italian directors.

When Ray returned to Calcutta, Jean Renoir—with whom he had become acquainted before the trip—was hard at work on *The River*. The chance to watch several days of location shooting formed the next step in Satyajit Ray's film education. With Renoir, Ray discussed a plan forming in his mind, and received strong encouragement to go ahead.

Throughout the years at the D. J. Keymer agency Ray, as a side occupation, illustrated books and designed book jackets. In the course of this work he designed a new, abridged edition of a widely

read two-volume novel, *Pather Panchali*, by Bibhuti Banerji. Not surprisingly, a screen version took shape in his mind, and this idea became an obsession. He sounded out Banerji on the possibility of turning the novel into a film.

A number of film producers wanted to buy the screen rights. When the author died, the problems of selecting a producer and negotiating a sale were left to the heirs. The illustrations made by Ray, and his obviously deep understanding and love of the work, helped the heirs to decide. Although Ray had never produced a film, he was permitted to buy the screen rights to *Pather Panchali* for Rs. 6,000.

As he worked on his screenplay, he also began to look for people and locations. In the tradition stemming from Robert Flaherty and more recently exemplified by the Italian neorealists, Ray was intent on using natural backgrounds as much as possible, as well as making maximum use of nonactors. He especially wanted to avoid familiar star faces, which would tend to shape roles into the molds of previous successes. Gradually the pieces began to fit together. He found a village, a meadow, a patch of woods, a boy, a girl. He tentatively selected a cameraman and technical assistants. The most elusive problem, for a long time, was the casting of the ancient aunt.

*Pather Panchali* became a feverish adventure that consumed all after-hours, weekends, and holidays. As production planning progressed, it was accompanied by the search for funds. Like many another, Ray began to seek out potential backers, particularly film distributors. Before long he had called on several dozen such financiers. The encounters followed a pattern. The door was in each case open to him, for he held the screen rights for *Pather Panchali*, which many had wanted. They were interested in knowing his plans and proposals.

To explain these Satyajit Ray had a notebook in which he had written his entire screenplay, specifying camera usage and even including on each page a series of sketches, to indicate the composition of key shots. In an accompanying sketchbook, dramatic highlights had been pictured in greater detail with wash sketches.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The script and book of wash sketches have been donated by Satyajit Ray to the Cinémathèque Française, Paris. For examples of the wash sketches, see the title pages.

PAGE FROM SATYAJIT RAY SCRIPT FOR *Pather Panchali*  
COURTESY CINÉMATHÈQUE FRANÇAISE

Most of the distributors visited by Ray had never seen a screen-play so complete in detail, nor a proposal so fully conceived and presented. Most hardly knew what to make of this material. It seemed impressive but irrelevant. They wanted to know a few simple things. Who were the stars? Who was writing the songs? Where were the dances? When Ray explained he had a different kind of film in mind, most concluded that it would not be a good risk. More than thirty distributors said "no."<sup>4</sup>

In some cases the "no" was not absolute. At Aurora Film Corporation, a forty-year-old company stemming from tent-show beginnings, managing director Ajit Bose was fascinated by the earnest visitor of towering physique with the vividly illustrated script. Bose said that he believed in the script and that Aurora would finance the film. Of course a professional director would be selected by Aurora to take charge. It was perhaps not an extraordinary stipulation to make, in dealing with a young man without a single screen credit. But to Ray the stipulation was out of the question.

Some gave him advice. They said his plans for location production were not practical, that everything he had in mind could be done better in a studio. In the Indian film world of 1952-53 virtually everything was done in a studio. The sort of thing Ray had in mind seemed to many a reversion to silent film days. Studio technology, the film industry was convinced, could accomplish almost any essential effect: On a few occasions Ray was goaded into passionate defense of his plans. Told that the rain scenes simply could not be done in the rain but required a well-equipped studio, he went into the monsoon rains with a 16-mm. Bolex for test sequences.

One day he found just the person he needed for the old aunt. She was a toothless hag who had once been a handsome and popular stage actress. Her career had been ended long ago by meningitis. Now permanently and painfully stooped, she lived from day to day with the help of opium tablets. She would be glad to play in the film, if it could mean the expensive tablets would keep coming. In a wavery but insistent voice she asked Ray: "Can you pay me twenty rupees a day?" Ray promised he would do so.

\* Interview, Ray.

Having found her, he dared not delay the start of production. He assembled his production team. From his advertising agency earnings—substantial by Indian standards—every possible rupee began to go into weekend and holiday shooting. He sold his art books and phonograph records to help meet production costs. In a few months almost Rs. 20,000 of personal funds had gone into production. The film had hardly begun.

On the basis of the footage shot, a distributor now decided to risk an investment. A distribution contract was signed. The sum of Rs. 20,000 was made available for a continuation of the shooting. Weeks later the distributor looked at what had been done and changed his mind. He backed out and the work ground to a halt.

At some time during these months of rising and falling fortunes, the American director John Huston came to Calcutta, met with members of the Calcutta Film Society, talked with Ray, and saw sequences of *Pather Panchali*. His enthusiasm spurred new hope and determination and also had other effects. John Huston mentioned the film to Monroe Wheeler of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, who was in India planning an exhibit on the arts of India. Wheeler became interested.

About this time Ray, in desperation, approached the government of the State of West Bengal for funds for *Pather Panchali*. There was no precedent for help from the state. But some state officials knew of the interest of the New York museum official, and this may have played a part in the final decision, which was made at the highest levels of state government. The film became a state project under the aegis of its director of publicity. West Bengal put up Rs. 200,000 for the completion of the film. The state became its owner and would, henceforth, call itself "producer" of the film, although its participation was solely financial.

Production was resumed in earnest. But because Ray was still working for the Keymer agency, progress was slow.

In 1954, when the film was nearly finished after two years of work, an invitation came to have the film premiered at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, on the occasion of its Indian exhibit. The deadline necessitated a supreme effort to bring the film to a finish. Days and nights of intensive editing followed. Ravi Shankar com-

pleted his brilliant musical score in a matter of hours. There was a series of all-night recording and mixing sessions. Reels were rushed to and from laboratories. When Satyajit Ray finally took his package of film cans to the Calcutta air-freight office of Pan-American, and stood at the counter awaiting his turn, he fell asleep leaning on his package.

The world premiere at the Museum of Modern Art had some long-range results. Edward Harrison, who had scored successes in the distribution of Japanese films in the United States, was not present at the showing but, hearing about the film, arranged for a private screening a few days later. This led to eventual American distribution by Harrison not only of *Pather Panchali* but also of later Satyajit Ray films. The groundwork for this development was actually laid before Indian distribution had begun.

The State of West Bengal, as owner of the film, meanwhile entrusted its Indian distribution to Aurora Films, which thus once more came into contact with the young man with the script. The film, which was in the Bengali language, opened early in 1956 at three Calcutta theatres simultaneously. It started slowly, at first puzzling many patrons. Then it took hold, began to draw crowded theatres, and ran thirteen weeks. In the Bengali home market Ray had scored a substantial success. In the rural areas of West Bengal the film was likewise successful, but on a smaller scale. It stayed two weeks at many smaller theatres.

It must be remembered that after the India-Pakistan partition a Bengali film could be understood by less than 10 percent of the people of India. In India a Bengali film, even a hit film, had a normal theatrical distribution in West Bengal only. After that its Indian career was practically over. It might have some Pakistan distribution, but this market was becoming progressively more restricted and less profitable. Within India a Bengali film of unusual interest might also have special "Sunday morning showings" at theatres in New Delhi, Bombay, or Madras, for small Bengali-speaking colonies in those metropolitan centers. Such showings had prestige value but yielded little income. Dubbings into other Indian languages were almost never made. Extraordinary success might lead to the making of new versions in other Indian languages, but

*Pather Panchali* was so completely of Bengal that such action seemed implausible in this case. Subtitled versions were not generally considered practical, in view of limited Indian literacy.

Thus successful exposure to the Bengali-speaking people of India would normally have ended the career of *Pather Panchali*, even within India. The rest of India might not even have become aware of it or of Satyajit Ray, had it not been for the Cannes festival.

At Cannes the West Bengal entry, directed by an unknown, was at first not taken seriously by the festival management. At one phase of the program planning it was assigned to a morning showing, which would mean that only a handful of people would see it, while some of the jurors still rested in bed. The "important" films were supposed to come in the late afternoons or evenings. But a handful of people in Cannes—they included Edward Harrison and several others—had seen *Pather Panchali* and regarded it as "important." After crucial backstage struggles *Pather Panchali* was rescheduled for an afternoon showing immediately after a film by the Japanese director Kurosawa. But the Japanese delegation had arranged a large party after the Kurosawa film and some of the judges adjourned for this important social occasion. Next day the French critic André Bazin journalistically protested these events as "the scandal" of the festival and his protests led to a rescreening of *Pather Panchali*. Finally assembled, the judges were astonished at the Indian film and voted it the "Best human document" of the festival. Thus began a sequence of awards which was to make *Pather Panchali* known on every continent, placing Ray almost at once among the great directors of the world and launching an extraordinary succession of Ray films including *Aparajito* (The Unvanquished), 1957; *Jalsaghar* (The Music Room), 1958; *Parashpatar* (The Touchstone), 1958; *Apur Sansar* (The World of Apu), 1959; *Devi* (Goddess), 1960; *Teen Kanya* (Three Daughters), 1961; *Rabindranath Tagore* (Rabindranath Tagore), 1961; *Kanchanjanga* (Kanchanjanga), 1962; *Abhijan* (Expedition), 1962.

Except for the multilanguage documentary *Rabindranath Tagore*, all these films would be Bengali-language films, so that only Bengalis would experience them in their native tongue. Although

the name of Ray would become widely known in India as a result of his international fame, his films would tragically remain a closed book to millions speaking only Hindi, Telugu, Tamil, Marathi, Gujarati, Kannada, Malayalam, Assamese, Oriya, Kashmiri, and other languages. After some years the fame of Ray would lead to *evening* theatrical showings of several of his films in New Delhi, Bombay, and Madras, mainly in the form of "trilogy festivals" or "Satyajit Ray festivals." But being in effect foreign-language events, these would attract a somewhat specialized following, comparable to art-theatre audiences elsewhere. In Bombay *Pather Panchali* would be run with Hindi subtitles and *Apur Sansar* with English subtitles—among the comparatively rare uses of this technique in India. But by and large Satyajit Ray would remain a Bengali film maker. In one sense this would be a limitation; in another, the key to his growing stature.

From the success of *Pather Panchali* in the Bengali film markets of India the West Bengal government earned back twice its Rs. 200,000 investment. Meanwhile it also received, during the first five years after release of the film, the following sums from foreign distribution:

United States	Rs. 251,230
China, People's Republic	40,000
Germany, France, Austria	25,000
United Kingdom	18,642
Poland	13,337
Thailand	11,880
Ceylon	6,612
Iran and Persian Gulf	6,500
Mexico	2,700
Netherlands	1,006
Total	Rs. 376,907

Along with receipts from Indian distribution, the state's income had thus reached, in these years, a total of about Rs. 800,000. And earnings were continuing.<sup>5</sup>

There are several astonishing elements in the success, financial and artistic, of *Pather Panchali*. Satyajit Ray, directing his first film,

\* Interview and correspondence, P. S. Mathur.

had decided not to use any of the established cameramen of the Indian film industry. Feeling that all were too saturated in pictorial formulas of the industry, he had gone instead to a much-admired still photographer, Subrata Mitra, and invited him to shoot his first motion picture. *Pather Panchali* was thus written, directed, and photographed by "newcomers."

Comparable to the selection of Mitra was that of Ravi Shankar, who composed and played the score. He was a musician of enormous celebrity, but not associated with "film music." Among the members of the cast, those with acting experience included the old aunt, the father, the rich lady next door, and the schoolteacher. Most of the performers were without professional experience.

A certain number of technicians with film backgrounds were enlisted in the enterprise. These included the film editor and the art director. The latter played a crucial role. Although outdoor scenes were shot at locations a dozen miles from Calcutta, much of the indoor work was finally done in a Calcutta studio, and sets for this were designed and built to match location structures. In using this procedure, Ray had to some extent adjusted his original plans, but without compromise to results. No hint of "studio quality," in scenic texture or lighting, was permitted.

The group worked with relatively simple means but with great technical resourcefulness. To avoid "slick" light effects they relied mainly on "bounce lighting," with the light directed at one enormous reflector. Ray has continued to favor this technique.

A memorable sequence of *Pather Panchali* showed the young girl, Durga, running through the woods. Keeping her in close-up, sharply in focus, the camera appears to move along beside her throughout the sequence. The effect would normally be gained by a trucking shot in which a camera moves on a track parallel to the running girl. No such equipment was available to the group. In actuality the sequence was shot by a stationary camera. The girl ran through the woods in an exact circle around this camera, which panned to follow her, using a telephoto lens. To ensure perfect focus, her course through the woods had been laid out by measurements with a piece of string from the camera position. The course ended where it began. No trucking shot could have been more precise in effect.

Most of *Pather Panchali* was postsynchronized; dialogue recorded on location was not actually used except as a guide in the recording of the final sound track, made under controlled acoustical conditions. Ray here followed the method of the Italian neorealists.

Satyajit Ray's prominent use of artists and technicians who were newcomers, at least to film, represented in some respects a repudiation of the Indian film industry and its prevailing tenets. The long failure of Indian films to win recognition in Western markets had generally been ascribed by industry leaders to insufficiency of technical resources. Occasionally they had journeyed to Hollywood in search of "know-how." They came back in awe of equipment they had seen. They duplicated Hollywood technical devices as best they could. If they only had greater resources, what they could not do! When finally an Indian won success on Western screens, it was achieved not by lavish equipment or vast resources. Though the makers of the success had a proper respect for technical precision, their victory had been won by something else: primarily, by integrity in the handling of content.

Not surprisingly, the victories of Ray aroused mixed feelings in various quarters, both in film industry and in government. The industry hailed the Satyajit Ray successes. But an undercurrent of pique was evident, especially in Bombay and Madras. In these centers it became customary to say that Ray's films were of course splendid "artistically," but that Bombay films—or Madras films—were better "technically." Evidence that Ray's films are considered, in Europe and America, superb on both technical and artistic grounds has not seemed especially welcome. There has of course also been a feeling of discomfiture about the successes of a project rejected by numerous private financiers and eventually financed by a state government.

In the central government official jubilation also had, from the beginning, some contrary undercurrents. There was of course delight that Ray had "put India on the international film map." He received a presidential award and other honors. But the success of *Pather Panchali* demonstrated to some the shortsightedness of central government policies toward film. In 1954, after three years of

silence, the government had put aside the idea of a Film Finance Corporation, as recommended by the Film Enquiry Committee. The central government considered the plan impractical for financial reasons. Now a state government had, in startling fashion, dramatized the arguments that had been advanced for the idea. It had shown that an alternative source of capital, controlled by a different set of values, could indeed liberate a film maker from success formulas dominating an industry. The state had even demonstrated that such government use of capital need not necessarily result in loss but might yield profit. It is not surprising that the central government now changed its mind about the feasibility of the idea. In 1957 the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting announced, almost as though it were a new idea, the government intention "to set up a Film Finance Corporation for the purpose of rendering assistance to film producers by way of loans."<sup>6</sup> Parliamentary approval was given in 1959 and the agency finally began operation in 1960, eight years after the recommendation of the Film Enquiry Committee—and thirty-two years after a similar recommendation of the Indian Cinematograph Committee. The West Bengal success appears to have had a part in spurring the action.

While the central government officially rejoiced over the success of *Pather Panchali*, some highly placed officials appear to have frowned on the film and especially its distribution abroad. The objection was that it pictured India in terms of poverty and that this damaged India's international image. This opinion never achieved the upper hand in decisions relating to *Pather Panchali*, but the persistence of the attitude was evident in various developments. In September of 1956 the magazine *Filmindia* reported:

The Government of India has directed that before any State Government sends films—features or documentaries—abroad for exhibition, the State Government should ascertain the film's suitability from the point of view of external publicity by the External Affairs.

Recently a State Government made direct arrangements for showing its film abroad with a foreign distributor, by-passing the External Publicity Division.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Report, 1956-57, p. 36.

<sup>7</sup> *Filmindia*, September, 1956.

The *BMPA Journal* offered additional information:

It has been pointed out that in a recent case a film production was sent abroad under direct arrangement between the State Government and a foreign distributor or exhibitor. The report on its exhibition received from the Indian Mission commented on its unsuitability from the point of view of external publicity.<sup>8</sup>

Government spokesmen have not confirmed that these actions related to *Pather Panchali* but have not identified the film involved.

In 1959 the Central Board of Film Censors announced additions to its list of material that might lead to censorship action. The additions included "abject or disgusting poverty." Industry spokesmen denounced this new "fetter on the freedom of the creative art of film production."<sup>9</sup> Again government spokesmen did not identify the film or films precipitating the regulation. To any admirer of *Pather Panchali* or its sequels it is inconceivable that any one should think in such terms of films so rich in warmth, humanity, and humor, yet it appears that some in the central government did regard the films in this light.

One can perhaps dismiss such aberrations, for the more important fact is that Satyajit Ray, with *Pather Panchali*, scored resounding victories of many kinds. Internationally he had won for the Indian film an assured place. Those attending international film festivals on all continents would begin to look for Indian entries, and the subsequent films of Satyajit Ray himself more than justified the interest. The awards won by Ray during the late 1950s and early 1960s kept him constantly in the international limelight, to a degree rivaled only by Ingmar Bergman of Sweden. In film histories, paragraphs on India began to expand into pages.

On the Indian home front, the Ray success set in motion changes of large potential, although results would be difficult to assess for some years to come. Such a development was the entry of the central government into film finance, a step which could presumably lead in various directions.

Meanwhile the state-financed *Pather Panchali* had already had some impact on the private-sector film industry. Though estab-

<sup>8</sup> *BMPA Journal*, August, 1956.

<sup>9</sup> *Annual Report, 1959-60* (South Indian Film Chamber of Commerce), p. 2.

lished formulas held their own, some film makers began to find investors, distributors, and exhibitors a shade less unwilling to attempt the unfamiliar. In this respect Calcutta led the way—not surprisingly, since it most surely needed to face the necessities of change. Here the change gave an opportunity for the rise of several new directors of promise. Among these was Asit Sen, a young commercial photographer whose first feature, *Chhalalal* (Movement), appeared a year after *Pather Panchali*. Financed by its participants, it was completed for Rs. 70,000 without stars and without songs, and was successful enough to win him backing for a number of subsequent films. Another was Tapan Sinha, product of the Calcutta Film Society, whose *Kabuliwala* (The Merchant from Kabul), released in 1956, and *Kudita Pasan* (The Hungry Stones), released in 1960, were both based on Tagore stories. Both won substantial successes, as did his *Hansuli Banker Upakatha* (Folk Tales of the River Bend), released in 1962. Another was Rajen Tarafdar, whose film *Ganga* (Ganges), a story of river fishermen made on location, was shown at the 1961 Venice film festival and was praised by *Variety* for its "robust approach to reality."<sup>10</sup> Its production and distribution would have been unlikely a few years earlier.

Toward Ray himself, the shift in industry attitude was evident. Backers who had shied at a Satyajit Ray *Pather Panchali* were ready to finance subsequent films. Aurora Films, which had expressed readiness to finance *Pather Panchali* in accordance with its own dictates, was willing to finance its sequel *Aparajito*, under Ray's direction and control. A variety of private backers provided finance for later feature films.

Nothing in *Pather Panchali* or in *Aparajito* had quite prepared the film world for the variety of genres that would be represented in the features that followed. These first two films had led to expectation of others in a similar vein. The reported determination of Ray to continue work in Bengal, drawing on its life and culture, strengthened this expectation. But even while continuing to explore his native region, Ray has demonstrated a rich diversity of moods, techniques, approaches, and interests. In this respect he has followed in the steps of his father and grandfather, and has also reminded us of his teacher, Tagore.

<sup>10</sup> *Variety*, September 13, 1961.

After making *Aparajito* and before starting *Apur Sansar*, the film that was to complete a trilogy on the family introduced in *Pather Panchali*, Ray made two other films, *Jelsaghar* (The Music Room) and *Parashpatar* (The Touchstone), both released in 1958. The first of these was in some respects a disappointment to Ray himself, yet was moderately successful in Bengal. It won an award for its music at the Moscow film festival. The next, *Parashpatar*, represented a complete change of mood. It was comedy-fantasy in an almost slapstick, satirical vein. Utterly delightful to its admirers, it was fairly well received in Calcutta but apparently baffled rural Bengal audiences. Its humor has been considered untranslatable and largely incomprehensible to anyone but a sophisticated Bengali. It has therefore had almost no showings outside West Bengal. It has apparently been the only Satyajit Ray film to represent a clear loss to its backers. This film was followed by *Apur Sansar* (The World of Apu), released in 1959 and completing the trilogy. It was extremely successful in Calcutta and throughout Bengal, and was the first Ray film to have a regular theatrical run in Bombay—with English subtitles.

Its place in the trilogy is curious. The films *Pather Panchali* and *Aparajito* were based on the massive Banerji book, but *Apur Sansar* was not. Although it followed threads of plot suggested by the novel, the story of the third film was largely invented by Ray. After completing *Aparajito* he felt unsatisfied to leave the characters, and the idea of a third film lurked in his mind. At the Venice film festival of 1957, when *Aparajito* was awarded the grand prize—Golden Lion of St. Mark—Ray found himself announcing a third film to follow. Having thus committed himself, he began to work intently on the idea and the film script rapidly took shape.

*Apur Sansar* was in many respects a turning point for Ray. In India *Aparajito* had had an extremely shaky debut. Less well received in Bengal than *Pather Panchali*, it had cast doubts on Ray's future. In a sense the Venice award rescued the film from what had seemed to be failure. But *Apur Sansar* proved an immediate, substantial box-office draw, exceeding *Pather Panchali*, and put Ray on new, solid footing. It also gave him confidence to rely on later occasions on material of his own.

to the general progress of the film, Ray has the full script in his hands the first day he arrives on the sets." She found Ray "very sure and definite about his work."<sup>13</sup>

With *Abhijan* Ray completed ten years of work as a film maker. He was already assured of a place in world film annals. But his future role in the film world of India confronted him with many problems, closely related to the problems of the Calcutta industry.

In January, 1962, came the news that Pakistan, in response to recommendations of a film investigation committee of its own, had decided to ban import of films "in any Indian or Pakistani languages, with or without a sound track, and all films depicting Indian or Pakistani way of living, either silent or dubbed."<sup>14</sup> The exclusion, decreed for a five-year period, put an end to an import that had already dwindled to a trickle. The film maker of Calcutta, producing in his native Bengali, now knew he must reconcile himself for the foreseeable future to a primary market consisting of less than 10 percent of the Indian people. If this was to be his sustenance, he and the Calcutta industry would live on the edge of destitution. The economics of the situation were summarized by Satyajit Ray in these terms: If a Bengali film costs more than Rs. 150,000, in nine cases out of ten it will not get its money back. "A Hindi film can afford to spend six times as much and reasonably expect to make a profit."<sup>15</sup>

Based on a shrunken market, could the Calcutta industry survive as a major factor in Indian film production? Physically its facilities already presented a shabby picture in comparison to those of Bombay and Madras. Madras, most recently risen to eminence as a film center, was becoming especially noted for its modern, efficient, well-kept studios and laboratories. In Calcutta, meanwhile, "studios remain only partially equipped, laboratory work continues to be erratic, and a general air of privation pervades all departments of production."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Cine Advance*, May 31, 1962.

<sup>14</sup> *Screen*, January 26, 1962.

<sup>15</sup> Ray, "Problems of a Bengal Film Maker," in *International Film Annual*, No. 2, p. 50.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

To survive, Calcutta must clearly reach other markets. For the individual film maker this might mean a new effort to produce double versions of the sort that had once won India-wide fame, as well as prosperity, for New Theatres Ltd. Satyajit Ray's *Abhijan* hinted he might pursue this possibility. But he would do so carefully, determined to make films as he knew he must, and not as alleged market considerations dictated.

But beyond the Hindi market was the world market. After Satyajit Ray, Indian producers, whether in Calcutta, Bombay, or Madras, could hardly help being conscious of it. *Pather Panchali* had hinted at the possibilities and by no means exhausted them. Analysis of foreign market potentialities became a popular occupation among producers—and not only among producers. Government officials, acutely concerned with foreign-exchange earnings and balances, began increasingly to think of the motion picture as an important commodity in the foreign-exchange struggle. Indian films had long had modest foreign markets in South Asia and in East and South Africa. In the independence era they had penetrated, occasionally with substantial success, into other markets including the Soviet Union. Now came the dream of dollar earnings in the United States and increased sterling balances in western Europe. The formation in 1958 of a government-industry Export Promotion Committee and proposals for an aggressive Export Promotion Council had impelling reasons behind them, related to the financial problems not only of film producers but of India.

In 1958 Satyajit Ray, working in Calcutta in the "general air of privation," wrote of the world market:

As for the audience abroad, they seem the likeliest to solve the financial problem, but our approach must be cautious and honest. There is no reason why we should not cash in on the foreigner's curiosity about the Orient. But this must not mean pandering to their love of the false-exotic. A great many notions about our country and our people have to be dispelled, even though it may be easier and—from a film point of view—more paying to sustain existing myths than to demolish them.<sup>17</sup>

Some observers have been puzzled that Satyajit Ray, who could work as a film maker anywhere in the world, should continue to

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

Roberto Rossellini arrived in India in 1956 with fanfare and was duly garlanded at airports. He was received by Prime Minister Nehru and accompanied him on an airplane trip to inspect a dam site, a huge new hydroelectric project. On the way Rossellini explained to the Prime Minister his plans for a film to be called *India '57*. It would include a dozen or so short tales, vignettes of the new India, changing yet eternal. One such vignette, for example, would deal with a worker on a new dam, such as they were going to inspect. Through such individual tales, audiences would glimpse the meaning of the present moment in the story of India. Rossellini had already synopsized a number of episodes of the sort he had in mind. They were to be filmed in various parts of India, suggesting its rich diversity as well as its essential unity. Before the end of the trip, Prime Minister Nehru was fully involved in the plan. He had suggestions, which Rossellini promptly incorporated in the project. In the following weeks Rossellini was put in touch with the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, as well as other ministries that would be helpful. A contract was drawn up under which the Indian government became a partner in the production. For some time the details of the contract were not made public. More than a year later, in December, 1957, in answer to questions from a member of the Lok Sabha, the essential facts were made known and the extent of government involvement revealed. The agreement had provided that Rossellini would make *India '57* under Indian government sponsorship. The film would be in color, 10,000–12,000 feet in length. While on location in various parts of India, Rossellini would also make twelve short color documentaries for Films Division distribution. The Indian government would make available to Rossellini special assistants and technical staff from the Films Division. It would also make Films Division equipment and facilities available to him. It would facilitate location arrangements. It would bear all travel expenses by rail within India and provide an additional Rs. 77,000 toward other expenses. Distribution rights for Italy and France would belong to Rossellini; all other rights would belong to the government of India.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *Lok Sabha Debates*, December 18, 1957.

The government assigned to Rossellini one of the most able of Films Division producers, M. V. Krishnaswamy. It was a logical choice. M. V. Krishnaswamy had served an apprenticeship with John Grierson in England and had subsequently studied in Rome at the Centro Sperimentale Cinematografia, Italian governmental academy for instruction in the film arts. During this period he had also, on the recommendation of Grierson, had a chance to work with Rossellini. M. V. Krishnaswamy was thus ideally equipped to serve as intermediary between Rossellini and those in India who could be of help to the project. Inevitably, Krishnaswamy put Rossellini in touch with Hari Das Gupta, highly respected Calcutta documentarian, friend of Satyajit Ray, and assistant to Renoir on *The River*. A close association with Das Gupta quickly developed.

Work was started on several of the *India '57* vignettes. The first to be completed was the story that used as its background the hydro-electric project. Those in India who saw the completed vignette were enthusiastic, feeling it ranked with the best of Rossellini's work. Intensive work was started on a vignette dealing with a mahout, an elephant boy. Shooting was also begun for a story about monkeys. Meanwhile disturbing news began to appear in papers throughout the world including, somewhat circumspectly, papers in India. Rossellini had become interested in Sunalina Das Gupta, wife of Hari Das Gupta. According to reports, she had left home for the Bombay hotel in which Rossellini was staying. Both were rumored to be planning divorces and marriage to each other.

The news, sensationalized in many countries, caused consternation in Indian government circles. The government's handling of the situation was simple. Rossellini's visa expired. Its renewal, regarded as a routine matter, did not take place. Rossellini, outraged by the low-level rebuff, tried to get in touch with Mr. Nehru. The Prime Minister was not available.<sup>24</sup> Work on *India '57* halted. Rossellini packed up and left India. No part of *India '57* has been publicly shown in India. Thus ended a government venture in feature production. Questions in the Lok Sabha, months after the departure of Rossellini, revealed that Rs. 84,218 had already been

<sup>24</sup> *Morning News*, May 5, 1957.

expended by the central government.<sup>25</sup> Nothing further was heard of the documentaries. The debacle occasioned discreet satisfaction in industry circles, which resented the underwriting of foreign talent on a scale more respectable than was generally considered proper for Indian talent.

In 1954, when an Indian delegation that included Raj Kapoor, K. A. Abbas, Bimal Roy, Nargis, and others was in Moscow, and *Awara* was being launched on its extraordinary Russian career, there was the inevitable talk about co-production. The idea was splendid, the Soviet Minister of Culture indicated, if the right story could be found—of interest equally to Russians and Indians. Abbas promptly proposed one. It was an historic incident which he had been told the previous evening by a Russian novelist concerning one Afanasi Nikitin, who had visited India in the fifteenth century, several decades before Vasco da Gama. He had left a journal throwing light on the Russia and India of the time. Abbas proposed that an Indian-Russian co-production be based on the journey of Nikitin. This journey had had no “historic” consequences. It had produced no trading post, colony, or military base. This was precisely the attraction of the story. Decades before the Portuguese advance of empire into India, long before the expeditions and settlements of the British, French, and Dutch, a Russian had visited India, made friends—and gone home again. This was the story Abbas proposed. It at once received a tentative Russian approval, and arrangements were made for Abbas and a Russian screenwriter, Maria Smirnova, to collaborate on a treatment. This collaboration set the stage for a long sequence of intricate diplomacy, extraordinary for its observance of protocol, that eventually resulted in the film *Pardesi* (The Traveler), distributed in the Soviet Union under the title *Khazdegi Za Tiu Morya* (Journey Across Three Seas).

The writing of the script and the negotiation of production arrangements consumed almost two years. A contract was signed—between two parties of extremely unequal magnitude. The party of the first part was Mosfilm, a major unit of Soviet film production,

<sup>25</sup> *Lok Sabha Debates*, December 18, 1957

with magnificent studios and facilities in Moscow; the party of the second part was Naya Sansar International, as Abbas now called his own production unit, which like hundreds of such units in India had a post office address but no studio, no laboratory, and very little by way of bank account. In spite of the inequality, every detail of contract and procedure asserted their parity.

It was agreed that the film would be directed by two co-directors: Abbas for Naya Sansar and V. M. Pronin for Mosfilm. Russian actors would act in Russian; some of their dialogue would later, for the Indian version, be dubbed into Hindi. Indian actors would act in Hindi; some of their dialogue would later, for the Russian version, be dubbed into Russian. The Russian director would direct the Russian actors and would rely on the Indian director for criticism and suggestions. The Indian director would direct the Indian actors and would look to the Russian director for criticism and suggestions. The production schedule called for approximately four months of shooting in India and four months of work in the Soviet Union. It was agreed that expenses in India would be born by Naya Sansar and expenses in the Soviet Union by Mosfilm. Most of the shooting would necessarily be done in India. However, all dubbing, and the recording of the film score, would be done in the Soviet Union. Mosfilm would also supply all raw stock and laboratory work. The Soviet Union decided to make its version in wide screen, not yet established in India. Therefore three satisfactory takes would have to be made of each shot: a wide-screen take for the Soviet Union; a standard take for India; a third as a safety reserve. Each party would edit its own version; thus the arrangement allowed the Russian and Indian versions to differ. Naya Sansar was to get all distribution rights for India and the traditional Indian overseas markets in Asia and Africa. The Soviet Union would have distribution rights within its borders and in other socialist countries. The Soviet Union would also handle distribution in western Europe and the Americas but Naya Sansar would share in this revenue.

Studio shooting began in a Bombay studio in October, 1956, with a scene of the Russian Afanasi meeting an Indian girl in a ruined temple. Both directors were in action. Director V. M. Pronin wanted

to have rehearsals before shooting. Director Abbas felt obliged to point out that this was not customary in India, at least not for important stars, who were much too busy, going from production to production. An international crisis was avoided when the Indian stars volunteered to rehearse. Then directors Pronin and Abbas simultaneously shouted: "Camera!" The production was under way.

But Abbas meanwhile had to solve a crisis of his own. Naya Sansar faced weeks of location expenses in India, and would normally meet these by securing an advance from a distributor. Indian distributors were much interested in the international venture but there was a stumbling block. Payment of an advance by a distributor usually involved transfer of the negative as security. The negative, however, was accumulating in a Moscow laboratory.

Abbas was fortunately able to discuss his problem with Prime Minister Nehru, who at once called the matter sympathetically to the attention of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting and the Ministry of Finance. Since the project involved no expenditure of foreign reserves but created likelihood of foreign earnings, it was of interest to the government, quite aside from its intercultural values. In a move without precedent, the Finance Ministry made a loan of Rs. 200,000 to Naya Sansar, at 4 percent interest per annum.<sup>26</sup> Nine months later Naya Sansar was able to repay it.

The loan made it possible for Abbas to meet location expenses and then to fly a group of thirty Indian artists to Moscow. These included eight musicians, who in the final score were accompanied by 100 Russian musicians. In Moscow the postsynchronization for both Russian and Hindi versions was done by girl technicians who knew no word of Hindi. The Indians were astounded at their skill and precision. Although dialogue was translated, the six songs were left in Hindi in both versions.

Mosfilm is said to have made 600 prints of *Pardesi*,<sup>27</sup> a measure of its satisfaction with the project. In India the film, released in

<sup>26</sup> The details of the Abbas loan, as of the Rossellini contract became public through the parliamentary question p. 1d. *Lok Sabha Debates*, November 22, 1957.

<sup>27</sup> Interview, Abbas.

1957, more than recouped its cost but drew mixed comment. The producers had used as backgrounds various centuries-old structures available in India. There was no objection to this except that they had sometimes used them, in the film, in locations different from their actual locations. An old temple used as a west-coast temple was recognized as in actuality an east-coast temple. The producers were denounced for this affront to authenticity. Such objections may have concealed others less freely expressed, such as political objections. Also, without doubt, the story gave nationalist satisfaction to Russians more substantially than to Indians. The Russian film-goer could identify himself with a bearded hero who, centuries ago, made an extraordinary journey. While the film called attention to the splendors already achieved by India at that time, the principal Indian role in the story was to provide women who fell in love with, or were loved by, the bearded blond hero. Despite objections, expressed and unexpressed, *Pardesi* presented impressive spectacle, and was in itself an achievement in diplomacy.

It was in 1961 that Twentieth Century-Fox, with *Nine Hours to Rama*, at last proceeded with long-rumored plans for production in India, using Indian backgrounds and artists along with Western artists and technicians. It was not surprising that the company should undertake such a venture. Indian government policy had made it almost inevitable.

It will be recalled that since the First World War the leading American film companies had dominated the foreign film field in India. Most had had offices in India since the 1920s or early 1930s.<sup>28</sup> After independence Indian policy had favored "established importers," which tended to protect the position of the American companies vis-à-vis importers of other countries. However, India also began in various ways to restrict the profits of importation.

One kind of restriction limited the amount of footage that could

<sup>28</sup> The Kinematograph Renters' Society Ltd., which represents the American companies in India, gives the following dates: Universal, previously represented by various agents, opened its office in 1927; Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1929; Paramount, 1930; Fox (later Twentieth Century-Fox), 1931; Warner Brothers, previously represented by Madan, 1933; the interests of United Artists have been represented by Twentieth Century-Fox. Interview, Gole.

be imported. A general import-control rule allowed established importers to bring into India, during a year, 10 percent of what they had imported in their best year. However, this could be modified by special agreements. In the case of the American companies a special 27-month agreement, effective January, 1958, was concluded between the Indian government and the Motion Picture Export Association of America; it was followed by a second agreement, which took effect in April, 1960. Under the first of these agreements each of the American companies established in India could bring in annually 75 percent of the footage imported in its best year; under the second agreement, 55 percent.

But there was another restriction, of more decisive impact. In the early days of independence the companies could remit to the United States virtually all revenue earned in India. *The Report of the Film Enquiry Committee*, describing the situation in 1951, stated that distributors of foreign films could "remit up to 70 percent of the gross revenue collected."<sup>29</sup> But when Indian finances took a turn for the worse, remissions were sharply curtailed. The 1958 agreement provided that the American companies could remit only 12½ percent of net receipts. The 1960 agreement provided that they could remit only such amounts of their receipts "as is determined by the Indian government."<sup>30</sup>

The result of the agreements was that American companies could continue substantial importations but that earnings accumulated in blocked rupee accounts, usable only in India. By December, 1960, Twentieth Century-Fox Corp. (India) Private Ltd., had in the name of its United States affiliate an account of Rs. 1,610,159.<sup>31</sup> This fund was presumably available to finance location costs for *Nine Hours to Rama*.

Based on the Stanley Wolpert novel, *Nine Hours to Rama* went before the cameras late in 1961 as a Red Lion Films production for Twentieth Century-Fox, directed by Mark Robson. A number of Western performers, as well as technicians, came to India for the

<sup>29</sup> *Report of the Film Enquiry Committee*, p. 25.

<sup>30</sup> *Motion Pictures Abroad: India*, p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Files, Registrar of Companies, Bombay.

production. Several prominent Indian actors were also engaged. The story touched on the final hours of the life of Gandhi.

The film was not intended as a "co-production"; Twentieth Century-Fox certainly meant it to be made, in so far as might be possible, on a "nongovernment basis." But the Indian government soon became deeply involved. A foreign venture of this sort required various clearances. Besides, the producers wanted to use public locations, and portray military personnel including members of the president's bodyguard. Before long the film script had been reviewed by three ministries: the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, the Ministry of Home Affairs, and the Ministry of External Affairs. Some objections were made; Red Lion Films submitted a revised script which took care of these. The producer was then notified by the government that it "had no objection" to the making of the film in India. Director Robson had reason to believe he would now have clear sailing. He began staging and filming mammoth crowd scenes in the streets of Delhi. At this time a press campaign descended on *Nine Hours to Rama*.

It will be recalled that K. A. Abbas, architect of the Indian-Soviet *Pardesi*, was throughout his career a journalist as well as a film maker. In the 1940s, after brief tenure as *Bombay Chronicle* film critic, he had become writer of a weekly column occupying its final page, titled "Last Page." In 1948 he had transferred "Last Page" to the lively *Blitz*, which, according to an analysis in *Far Eastern Survey*, is "well edited and specializes in sensational stories (not necessarily veracious) about Government. . . . It is bitterly opposed to America and is to some extent pro-Soviet, although the evidence does not indicate that its editor and proprietors are believers in Communist ideals."<sup>32</sup>

As *Nine Hours to Rama* began its location work, Abbas started a fusillade of questions addressed not only to its American director, whom he called "Mark (*Peyton Place*) Robson," but also to the government agencies involved, whom he called "accessories to the crime." Other writers, in various publications, joined the attack.

<sup>32</sup> Mani, "The Indian Press Today," *Far Eastern Survey*, July 2, 1952.

It appeared that these government agencies had been unaware of, or uninterested in, questions of casting. In reviewing the script, their concern had been to make certain the Gandhi scenes were written with respect. It now appeared that the most glamorous of the visiting Western stars, screen idol Horst Buchholz, would be playing the assassin of Gandhi, Nathuram Godse. Did director Mark (*Peyton Place*) Robson mean to make a hero out of the unspeakable Godse? Did the American "friends of Godse" propose to add insult to injury by committing a "second assassination of Gandhi" on Indian soil? A correspondent for the London *Daily Mail*, interviewing Robson, found him ready to reply. Robson is reported to have said: "Possibly there is a danger of making Godse a hero, but this is a classic. Shakespeare explained why Brutus killed Caesar, and not without sympathy."<sup>33</sup>

Did Robson consider himself another Bard of Avon? Did he equate Gandhi with Caesar? As Robson completed his location sequences, the questions piled up. There had been talk of following the Delhi location work with studio shooting in Bombay, at the Mehboob studios. But on January 13 the unit left for London by a night flight to complete the studio work there. If the unit had stayed in India more than ninety days, it was explained, its members would have had to pay Indian income taxes. The Bombay studio plans had therefore been abandoned some time ago. But as Abbas saw it, they had "preferred to leave India in the darkness of the night, without answering our questions." He therefore turned the questions to Dr. Keskar, adding others.

Were any Indian cine technicians working with the Robson unit in any responsible capacity, e.g., as cameraman, sound recordists, assistant directors, etc.? If not, why not? In no other country can a foreign film unit carry on shooting without engaging local technicians—this is done not only to safeguard the trade union rights of local workers but to protect national interests being jeopardized by foreign film makers. Why is it not done in India?<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in *Blitz*, January 20, 1962.

<sup>34</sup> Abbas, "Last Page," *Blitz*, January 20, 1962.

Film associations chimed in with similar queries and demands. The Federation of Western India Cine Employees forbade its members to fly to England to complete the studio scenes until various Western participants had been retroactively enrolled and dues paid. The Indian Motion Picture Producers Association demanded that, in the future, all rushes of foreign film units in India be scrutinized by censors.<sup>35</sup>

The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, peppered with criticism, was eventually goaded into a statement. The ministry's "press note," as reported in *Screen*, stated that the producers of *Nine Hours to Rama*, after submitting their revised script, had indeed been "informed by the Government that it had no objection" to the filming of the picture in India, "but this should not be taken to mean that the script had in any way the Government's approval." The ministry reassured the public that the Central Board of Film Censors would, of course, examine the film before its release in India. The ministry also appeared to believe it would have the opportunity to have revisions made before release of the film elsewhere—a somewhat dubious assumption.<sup>36</sup>

To understand the vitriolic tone of much of the argumentation surrounding this film, we must perhaps look beyond the case itself. Because "established importers" were favored in the granting of film import licenses, Indian policy was often attacked as buttressing the entrenched position of the American companies. This attack came especially from those interested in promoting importation of films from elsewhere. Abbas in his columns had sometimes attacked obstacles that blocked exhibition of films of other lands. Besides the difficulty of getting import licenses, there was the difficulty of securing bookings in theatres habitually showing American films. A few such theatres were under long-term lease to American companies, and two were owned by them. These circumstances, helping to protect the status quo for American interests, were favorite topics of indignation. The case of "the American Gods" was, in a sense, an opportunity to attack this favorite target as well as another cherished foe, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.

<sup>35</sup> *Screen*, January 26, 1962.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, February 2, 1962.

Besides film production in India, at least one other film use of blocked accounts was available to the American companies. Via lump-sum purchases in blocked rupees, they could acquire American rights in Indian films. Their successful distribution in the United States would presumably convert the assets into dollars. Many in the Indian government and the film industry had hoped the American companies would do this. Many were convinced the American companies could do it—at a profit—if they wished to. Some also felt the companies should do it as a matter of obligation, in view of the large number of American films admitted into India. But the companies have generally held that they have seen no Indian films they could profitably handle.<sup>37</sup> They have also pointed out that they do not control the American market, that it is freely competitive and open to any importer of Indian films without quota restrictions. The failure of the American companies to use blocked funds for purchase of Indian films has been bitterly resented by some Indian producers. The bitterness may well have contributed to the tensions over *Nine Hours to Rama*.

Our brief accounts of *India '57*, *Pardesi*, and *Nine Hours to Rama* will suggest that international productions offer a stormy way of life. Each brewed its tempests. Yet for reasons economic and political, it seems certain such cross-cultural ventures will continue. In the year 1959 alone, negotiations for numerous new ventures were reported in the Indian press. They included a proposed Indo-German production,<sup>38</sup> an Indo-Spanish product...<sup>39</sup> an Indo-Egyptian production,<sup>40</sup> a new Indo-Soviet production,<sup>41</sup> an Indo-American production,<sup>42</sup> and even an Indo-Pakistan production.<sup>43</sup> As in the case of past international productions, any such ventures are certain to produce summit diplomacy.

<sup>37</sup> Headquartered in Bombay, largely manned by Indian personnel from western India, the India offices of the American companies were scarcely aware of the rise of Satyajit Ray. Even if they had been aware of him, it is unlikely they would have considered his films suitable for the American market, which they naturally judge in terms of the products of the major American companies.

<sup>38</sup> *Hindu*, August 31, 1959.

<sup>39</sup> *National Herald*, September 13, 1959.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, October 11, 1959.      <sup>41</sup> *Bharat Jyoti*, July 19, 1959.

<sup>42</sup> *Indian Express*, September 17, 1959.

<sup>43</sup> *National Herald*, August 14 and November 22, 1959.

The internationalization of the film field, and the resultant deepening involvement of government in it, has another aspect not yet mentioned. This has to do with film export and its growth.

An Indian government memorandum of 1961, circulated in the film industry, analyzed foreign markets long enjoyed by Indian films as well as new markets apparently ready for development. Some of the established markets were summarized as follows:

There are a hundred and one cinema theatres in British East and Central Africa, a number of which exhibit Indian films. . . . There are about forty theatres in Sudan, twenty of which exhibit Indian films. . . . There are seven theatres in Aden, four of which exhibit Indian films frequently. . . . There are six theatres in Bahrain, two or three of which show Indian films. . . . There are forty-seven theatres in Burma, thirty-four of which show Indian films. . . . There are twenty-eight theatres in Cambodia, most of which are exhibiting or are willing to exhibit Indian films. . . . Ceylon has two hundred and fifty theatres and Indian films are shown in almost all. . . . There are eight hundred and ninety-two cinema theatres in Indonesia, most of which exhibit Indian films. . . . There are about thirty theatres in Teheran, the capital of Iran, twenty of which exhibit Indian films either regularly or occasionally. . . . There are about two hundred and ten theatres in Singapore, the Federation of Malaya and British Borneo, fifty of which exhibit Indian films. . . . There are about eighty-five theatres in Thailand, a few of which are showing Indian films.<sup>44</sup>

In addition, theatres in a score of countries in Europe and America had, since Indian independence, shown Indian films for the first time. Among these were, of course, the United States and the Soviet Union.

However, in a number of these markets, old and new, problems were developing. The Soviet Union, after a number of years of showing Indian films "without expecting that in return India will purchase Soviet films," was beginning to ask for reciprocal action.<sup>45</sup> The governmental memorandum, *Markets for Your Films*, indicated that the Soviet Union had agreed to "import from India films equal in footage to that imported by India from the U.S.S.R."<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> *Markets for Your Films*, pp. 1-7.

<sup>45</sup> *Cine Advance*, September 22, 1961.

<sup>46</sup> *Markets for Your Films*, p. 10.

The Soviet Union was thus putting on India a pressure similar to that which India was trying to exert on American film interests.

Pressure of the same sort was coming from Indonesia. Here the situation endangered a market in which India had for some time held a leading position. The situation in Indonesia was described in these terms by the 1956 *Motion Picture Year Book of Asia*, published in Japan:

With ever-increasing imports of Indian films posing a major threat to domestic film makers, the Indonesian film industry, as a whole, continued in 1955 to survive a major crisis. . . . With the exception of Indian films, the average Indonesian picture grossed twice as much as the average import. Virtually all the 80 imported Indian films racked up higher earnings than domestic releases. Roughly 80 films were produced by the dozen or so Indonesian firms engaged in picture making. . . . Industry quarters are demanding that imports of Indian products be limited to thirty per year.<sup>47</sup>

A quota system of the sort demanded was put into effect, and Indian imports were subsequently held to about thirty per year. But meanwhile Indonesia was also demanding reciprocity. The Indian exporters dealing with Indonesia were put in a difficult dilemma by such demands. Even if they wanted to import Indonesian films, they could not do so for want of Indian import licenses. They were therefore under pressure to do something about their own country's import system. We see this pressure in operation in a story datelined Bombay, in an Indian film trade paper:

Film distributor and exporter K. K. Kapoor, who visited Djakarta recently as a delegate to the Indian Film Festival and took a prominent part in the discussion with Indonesian authorities, has raised a pertinent point. In a statement he says that the distributors like him who negotiate for the rights of Indian films for overseas territories are denied the right to negotiate for the import of films from those territories to India.

In Djakarta, for instance, K. K. Kapoor was in a position to sell films to Indonesia but he had no import license which would enable him to buy Indonesian films for India. The import licenses given on the basis of old record have no relation whatsoever to the export of Indian films. This is a rather odd position which the Government of India ought to rectify by linking export of films from India to the import. . . .

The festivals of Indian films abroad have no meaning unless those who

<sup>47</sup> *Motion Picture Year Book of Asia, 1956*, p. 67.

participate in them have a right not only to sell Indian films but to buy the foreign films in return. . . .

Thanks to the lack of such facilities, the Indian film export to the Soviet Union, for instance, has not made much headway during the last eight years. . . .

Strangely enough India imports maximum number of films from countries like U.S.A. and U.K., which hardly import Indian films at all. . . . This system obviously demands change; and it can be best effected by enunciating a new policy which would compel every importer of foreign films to export Indian films, or rather, would grant licenses only to the exporters of Indian films abroad.<sup>48</sup>

Thus there is pressure from various sides for a change of policy. To save and expand export markets, government is urged to alter import practices and, in effect, to play an active role in distribution.

Still another aspect of film export is pushing the Indian government into deeper involvements in the problems of film. Export is crucially important because of the importance of foreign exchange to India's survival and development. When a film earns foreign currency, a substantial portion of it is taken over by government, and the exporter reimbursed in India in rupees. During the last decade, published statistics show a rise in the foreign earnings of Indian films:<sup>49</sup>

1954	Rs. 9,713,000	1958	Rs. 11,309,000
1955	11,139,000	1959	15,379,000
1956	12,922,000	1960	17,589,000
1957	12,817,000	1961	16,331,000

Encouraging as the figures may seem, producers and government are convinced they do not tell the full story. They are convinced that the "real" earnings abroad of Indian films are two or three times what these figures suggest. They feel that some exporters, to avoid currency controls, are diverting a portion of earnings into secret foreign accounts, and reporting as earnings substantially lower figures. For this reason Mehboob Khan, producer of several films which have done well abroad, is among those urging the government to take an active role in film export.<sup>50</sup> He sees both producer and government gaining by it.

<sup>48</sup> *Cine Advance*, September 22, 1961.

<sup>49</sup> *India*, 1962, and previous editions of this reference annual.

<sup>50</sup> *Cine Advance*, September 22, 1961.

In dealing with countries where government trading commissions have taken charge of film negotiations, Indian exporters have found their earnings suffering. Exports to Ceylon are an example. In former years these were the subject of direct negotiation between Indian producers and Ceylon distributors. It was not unusual for the producer of a Tamil film—in Madras, Salem, or Coimbatore—to receive Rs. 100,000 for Ceylon rights. Some producers got this as an advance. Modern Theatres, of Salem, sometimes produced a film on advances from Ceylon and Singapore.<sup>51</sup> After 1958 producers had to sell Ceylon rights through a Ceylon trade commissioner stationed in Bombay. This official, with his substantial bargaining power, was soon able to reduce prices to an average of Rs. 50,000 per film for Ceylon rights—paid on delivery, never as an advance.

With such examples of the advantages of centralized negotiation, it is not surprising that many Indian producers, in spite of long hostility to government, began gradually to favor participation of government in export matters. Thus as film traffic between nations has increased, the pressures for government involvement have also increased. In the Indian film world—an archipelago of small businesses in a sea of public enterprise—this raises an insistent question: How private can the private industry remain?

#### *This showing sold out*

The Indian film world is conscious of many pressures for change. At the moment they are outbalanced by forces . . . business-as-usual. The reasoning behind these forces can be summarized in a few words: theatres are crowded. Throughout India lines wait at box offices. In India no other medium matches film in its hold on wide audiences.

Since earliest film days, these audiences have included a broad range of economic strata, which are reflected in the range of admission prices. Three, four, or five price brackets are common. In the average city cinema, seats for evening showings may range from a low of Re. 0.10 to a high of Rs. 2; in the fancier city cinemas the high-priced seats—loges, boxes, or “sofas”—may run to Rs. 4. In mosfussil, the rural areas, a common range is Re. 0.25 to Re. 1 or

<sup>51</sup> Interview, T. R. Sundaram.

**Re. 1.33.** In these one may still find the lowest-price group sitting on the ground—in 1958 the State of Madras enacted a requirement that the cinema provide “druggets or carpets or mats” for ground customers<sup>62</sup>—while the next price group may sit on benches without backs, the third on benches with backs, the fourth and highest on regular chairs. The chair customers are likely to have only three or four rows in the back. Ground customers are likely to outnumber all others put together.

The Westerner accustomed to visiting a cinema on the spur of the moment may find this difficult in India. In the cities, the better seats for weekend showings are often sold out days ahead. Evening showings of a successful film will also be largely sold out ahead of time. All except the cheapest seats are sold on reserved-seat basis. One buys a particular seat for a particular showing. In big metropolitan cinemas there may be four showings, at approximately noon and 3, 6, and 9 P.M. On Sundays and even on Saturdays a fifth may be added, at about 9 A.M. At cinemas in less crowded areas there may be only one or two showings per day, in most cases starting after dark and often in semi-open structures, so that darkening and ventilation problems are avoided.

In big cities the 9 A.M. and noon showings may be devoted to films other than the scheduled feature. Revivals or foreign films may be shown at this time. In Delhi, Bombay, and Madras, films of Satyajit Ray first appeared as “Sunday morning shows.” Children’s films, such as those of the government-sponsored Children’s Film Society, may also occupy the early periods, although their distribution has been slight.

The crowded state of theatres, reflecting a shortage of exhibition facilities, puts power in the hands of the exhibitor and helps explain such phenomena as the excessive value placed on stars and reported payments of “black money” to key theatres to secure bookings.

Since a theatre must be emptied, then filled again, in the brief gaps between showings, there is likely to be much congestion at this

<sup>62</sup> *Madras Filmdairy, 1959*, p. 7.

time. A half hour before the break the lobby begins to be crowded with waiting people. The city crowd has a varied look: some wear the Gandhian dhoti, some are in pajamas, some in pants with Indian shirt or closed coat, a few wear Western clothes. Some are barefoot, some wear sandals, some shoes. Most women wear saris; ladies in elegant silk saris with much jewelry are in evidence. There are usually many family groups.

Among the waiting people some squat, suspended an inch from the floor. Some stand about. Many theatres have restaurants, where the more well-to-do have a snack while waiting. Outside there is a coming and going of taxis, tongas, bicycle rickshas, and even hand-pulled rickshas. The lobby features stills of current and coming attractions, and perhaps a cutout display of a star. The emphasis on the star is everywhere in evidence. Fan magazines—there appear to be some two hundred in India—and song leaflets may be hawked on the sidewalk and in the lobby.

While city cinemas are architecturally similar to Western cinemas, some rural cinemas are quite different. This is especially true of "temporary cinemas." These are a phenomenon that has played a part in the deep penetration of the motion picture into rural areas, especially in the southern states. Of the approximately 4,400 cinemas in India in 1962, about half were in the four southern states of Madras, Kerala, Mysore, and Andhra Pradesh. Of these, 650 were classified as temporary. In this region most villagers were within reach of a cinema. This was especially true of Madras, which had 810 cinemas, of which 360 were "temporary."

A temporary cinema, in Madras state law—each state has slightly different regulations—is one that stays less than a year in one location. If this location proves profitable, the exhibitor may in practice reopen in the same place after a short lapse of time—after the monsoon, for example. The law says, "there shall be an interval of three months before the same site is again licensed."<sup>53</sup> Or he may move a hundred yards down the road. By remaining "temporary" he escapes some of the rigid regulations regarding exits,

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

sanitary facilities, and parking facilities that apply to permanent structures.

In effect, a temporary cinema is an old-style traveling cinema that has settled down, but remains in the legal framework evolved for traveling cinemas. States have permitted this to happen because of the various values involved. In Madras, for example, approved films shown by requirement include not only those from the central government Films Division but a few from the state itself. The non-traveling temporary cinema has increased the communication network available to central and state governments. Many a rural cinema, operating in an area of low economic level, could hardly survive on any basis except that available to temporary cinemas.

While some rural cinemas use tents, and many tin-roof structures are also seen—especially in the north—the southern temporary theatre is usually a thatched-roof structure, built according to age-old practice. During years when metal, cement, and other precious materials have usually been unavailable for theatre building, thatched-roof construction has continued to prove invaluable in rural areas. For cinemas it appears to have several advantages. An excellent insulator, the thatch offers cool shelter. It also has fine acoustic qualities. The thatched roof loses its insulating effect after a year or two and must therefore be replaced. This necessity dovetails neatly with legal requirements as well as with the Indian weather cycle. The operator of a typical southern temporary cinema uses a thatched-roof structure for nine months, tears it down at the start of the monsoon, and afterward builds a new one under a new temporary license. A temporary license is generally given only in sparsely populated areas. The location must be a reasonable distance from the nearest temple, school, hospital, permanent cinema, and rival temporary cinema.

The thatched-roof cinema, operating only after dark, is generally open at the sides. It is surrounded, at a slight distance, by a fence or stockade. Admission is paid when entering the enclosed area. The area generally includes a refreshment stand as well as latrine facilities. Because the structure is entirely open at the sides, it appears to offer little fire hazard. The projection booth, at the rear, has its own tin construction.

In the crowds attending rural cinemas, whole families are even more in evidence than in the city. Babies crawl about, oblivious to the screen entertainment.

In rural and city cinema alike, the Indian audience is far more vocal in its reactions than most Western audiences. The appearance of the star, the beginning of a familiar song, bring instant audible reaction. The star, the song—these are clearly the pivots around which the Indian film world revolves.

In the cities American films are still much in evidence. They are booked regularly into about seventy city theatres.<sup>54</sup> Theatres booking American films are usually the better theatres, centrally located. Their prominence gives an exaggerated impression of the present role of the American film. The 1959 *International Motion Picture Almanac*, estimating the American share of screentime in various Asian countries in the mid-1950s, placed it at 70 percent for the Philippines, 60 percent for Burma, only 25 percent for India.<sup>55</sup> The Kinematograph Renters' Society, representing the American companies in India, says even this figure was greatly exaggerated. It reports the American share of Indian screentime in 1961 as "less than five percent."<sup>56</sup> The loyalty of the filmgoing public of India is to Indian stars, Indian songs.

Stars and songs—it is not surprising that the world of the studios likewise revolves around these. The deference, even homage, paid to stars is extraordinary. Crowds wait for them for hours around their homes and studios. Top stars feel obliged to maintain a certain style. Retinues of followers are usually on hand. Stars are expected to have foreign cars. In Japan, David Robinson tells us, "A star may come to the studio by bus or bicycle."<sup>57</sup> This is inconceivable in India. Though the temporal power of nawabs and maharajas may have fallen on politicians, it is the stars who have otherwise inherited their mantles. In 1962 Prime Minister Nehru captained a cricket team for a charity benefit; it played against another team

<sup>54</sup> Estimate by Eric Johnston, quoted in *Film Daily*, November 28, 1962.

<sup>55</sup> *International Motion Picture Almanac*, 1959, pp. 23A-24A.

<sup>56</sup> Interview, Gole.

<sup>57</sup> Robinson, "Sixty Years in Japanese Cinema," in *International Film Annual*, No. 2, p. 159.

captained by Vice-President Radakrishnan, shortly to become President. The event, promoted with fanfare, raised Rs. 30,000. A similar cricket match that same month featured teams captained by film stars Raj Kapoor and Dilip Kumar. It raised Rs. 100,000.<sup>58</sup>

In Madras one of the most astonishing phenomena is film star Sivaji Ganesan. Among southern film stars only M. G. Ramachandran, the star associated with the Dravidian movement, has in recent years come close to him in status. For some years a leading Madras theatre has shown only films starring Sivaji Ganesan. This has not been difficult, for he stars in innumerable films. For some years it has seemed risky for any producer to produce a Tamil film *not* starring Sivaji Ganesan. He produces films himself but also appears in the productions of others. He is always involved in many projects simultaneously, doling out a morning of shooting time here, an afternoon there, while numerous producers wait nervously for his next moment of availability. It is common for films made under these circumstances to be in production one, two, or three years, or even more. For some years in the Madras film industry scores of film workers—producers, directors, actors, writers, technicians—have at all times been dependent on the favorable decisions of Sivaji Ganesan. His nod secures financial backing. Because of his central importance, script, cast, and choice of director are all subject to his approval. During his precious appearances at the studio he works with speed and precision, and can be so charming to co-workers that he is adored by all. Then he is off again, leaving anxiety as to when he will return once more. In appearance he does not especially conform to any hero pattern. He is, on the contrary, squat and stockily built. But his fine voice has a large range of expressiveness, and he can play such a variety of roles that almost any starring role is offered to him—comic or tragic—without regard to suitability. Such is his standing, so precious his time, that no director dares direct him, and his scenes are often completely out of key with other portions of a film. Seldom has a substantial talent been used so recklessly—or so profitably. He has amassed a fortune and carries on well-organized and well-publicized charities.

<sup>58</sup> *Screen*, February 2, 1962.

under their feet, and that something drastic must be done to keep India Indian. Only in these terms can one understand why the Madras legislature should hold long, nervous debate on whether to ban rock 'n' roll from Indian films, without anyone having a clear idea of what the evil was. After some debate the Home Minister, Mr. Bhaktavatsalam, was asked to enlighten the legislators on the nature of rock 'n' roll. He answered: "I do not know the details or the technique of it, but I have heard that it is an obscene dance performed by men and women."<sup>62</sup>

Still others see the crisis as one of government encroachment. Both central and state governments, for reasons related to far-reaching problems, have become more and more involved in the film field, and some see this as a stranglehold of deadly danger.

The involvements of government in the film field have surely become varied. As we have seen, some have been welcomed by some sectors of the industry, others have not. Since independence the central government has become the chief producer of documentaries and newsreels. It has become the chief--almost the sole--producer of children's films. It has dabbled--as in *India '57*--in feature production. It has centralized control of censorship. It has entered film finance. With its Films Division auditoriums, it has become an exhibitor. With mobile vans it has carried this exhibition into rural areas. State governments have also used mobile vans, especially in areas not well covered by "temporary" cinemas. In 1961 the central government, with the launching of the Film Institute of India, embarked on film training. Meanwhile, for reasons of both "external publicity" and foreign exchange, it has taken i. ceasing control of import-export matters.

One aspect of this, not yet discussed, has far-reaching implications for Indian producers. For decades they have depended entirely on imported raw film, and have bought most of it from Kodak. Since the 1957 foreign-exchange crisis, permissible imports have been severely restricted by the quota system. In September of that year, Kodak and other importers were limited to 10 percent of what they had imported in their best year; the amount was later revised

<sup>62</sup> *Mail*, September 4, 1958.

to 60 per cent, then to 50, 66 2/3, 50, 40, 33 1/3, and 16 2/3 percent.

These restrictions necessitated a system of allocations to producers. The central government, assisted by regional advisory committees, took charge of these allocations. Exactly as in the Second World War, priorities were established favoring the "established" producer. In many ways a logical action, it was welcomed by industry leaders as curbing the disruptive effect of adventurers. In the Calcutta area, those with past production of five films received top consideration. Since the already world-famous Satyajit Ray, maker of *Pather Panchali*, *Aparajito*, *Jalsaghar*, and *Parashpatar*, did not fit into this top-priority category, he had to wait for a time for raw stock for *Devi*. This illustrates the dangers of any mechanical priority. On the other hand, if human judgments enter an allocation system, the danger of its political use looms large. The continuation of the foreign-exchange crisis makes this a problem of potential importance.

For the moment film shortages have been eased by state trading. In addition to stocks brought in by Kodak and others under their quotas, the central government has brought in quantities of film from eastern European countries, under barter arrangements; this film has come largely from the East German companies Agfa and Deko. The Agfa film is esteemed by Indian producers, the Deko disliked. This has introduced constant negotiation between producers and government agents to obtain the preferred film. Meanwhile the government had embarked on a solution of longer range. It had decided to set up its own raw-film factory, the Hindustan Photo Films Manufacturing Company, at Ootacamund in southern India, to supply all of India's raw-film needs and perhaps eventually to export film. Kodak was invited to collaborate on this project as consultant for a limited number of years, but did not wish to transfer its hard-won knowledge under any short-term arrangement. Several other companies took similar positions. Eventually, under an arrangement concluded in 1959,<sup>63</sup> the Indian government proceeded with its plans with the collaboration of a small French producer of

<sup>63</sup> *Indian Express*, December 30, 1959.

raw film, Bauchet, never a factor in world film markets. The start of quantity production, at first announced for 1962, was later set for 1963. The factory would begin with black-and-white film, postponing plans for color-film manufacture. Film producers uneasily faced the certainty that they would soon, of necessity, be using the products of this mammoth enterprise, launched with the assistance of a film manufacturer of less than first rank. If there should be difficulties, and shortages in any particular kind of film, there would of necessity be government allocations. Governmental control over the basic raw material of the industry would be complete. An allocation system would imply life-and-death authority over any film unit. The government was meanwhile talking of film equipment manufacture as a further saving of foreign exchange. The Indian producer, already hedged in by a great variety of government film activity and a multiplicity of controls, saw in the foreign-exchange crisis the certainty of their growth.

If the private film industry has been under constant attack from many sides, there has been an equally constant attack on almost all aspects of governmental activity relating to film. Letters to newspapers return again and again to this theme. The tone of such writings often suggests that they are reverberations of a larger struggle between private and public enterprise.

A letter to the *Times of India* states that the writer, "as a tax payer," is shocked at the way the Films Division is run.

That its productions are third-rate is not in doubt; even rural people are not willing to tolerate them . . . in the villages the services of local Congress bosses are requisitioned to persuade people to witness its productions. One of the most pathetic sights in the countryside is that of the Government's mobile film vans waiting forlornly for people to gather. . . . The Films Division (like A.I.R.) illustrates the point that art and culture can never be successfully nationalized.<sup>64</sup>

Another letter writer complains:

In a recent newsreel I noticed that all but one of the items related to Ministers. . . . Unless the Films Division, which holds an absolute monopoly

<sup>64</sup> *Times of India*, October 2, 1961.

over newsreels and documentaries, is released from the shackles of the Government and the ruling party there is every danger of Indian democracy being smothered by overwhelming propaganda aimed at establishing one-party rule in the country.<sup>65</sup>

The Children's Film Society has also been a frequent target of letter writers, usually charging bureaucratic ineptness and mismanagement.<sup>66</sup>

Editorials from time to time join the attack. An editorial in the *Indian Express* criticizes the government for its handling of India's second international film festival (1961), in which producers and directors are said to have been relegated to lesser seats while ministry officials, along with stars, decorated platforms.

Unfortunately the cheap tendency of the Union Ministry of Information and Broadcasting to focus all attention on itself is as pathetic as it is symptomatic of a film-star complex. The industry, not the Ministry, should be the "star" on such occasions.<sup>67</sup>

Another editorial, in the *Statesman*, takes up the perennial attack on governmental Hindi and, in passing, has a favorable word for the private film industry:

No one can really claim that the national language has taken form yet. The man in the street speaks a language that is far removed from what we hear on the radio. Clumsy new terms, old Sanskrit words transplanted into new contexts, the flowery literary term when a simple practical word would be much more comprehensible, these hardly add up to a workaday language in which the nation's everyday tasks are to be carried on. . . . I would venture that the language used in Bombay films is the nearest we have got yet toward evolving a language which has flexibility, simplicity and a quality which can best be described as communicable. Film makers, after all, can ill afford to experiment with language or ram things down people's throats.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, November 15, 1961.

<sup>66</sup> The charges led in 1962 to a reorganization of the Children's Film Society. Its films had generally been found unsatisfactory, although repeatedly praised in official pronouncements.

<sup>67</sup> *Indian Express*, October 28, 1961. In a similar vein the magazine *Indian Documentary* had criticized an official of the West Bengal government who in 1956 journeyed to New Delhi to accept the President's medal for *Pather Panchali* and even "paraded himself wearing it." *Indian Documentary*, Annual, 1956.

<sup>68</sup> *Statesman*, July 7, 1958.

The continual attacks on government, like those on industry, suggest that the status quo must yield to change. From every side come suggested solutions for the rifts and troubles of the film world. The proposals differ as sharply as the attacks.

To some the time has come for the industry itself to establish order and a new era of common sense. The suicidal fragmentation of the industry must end, runs the argument, and large combines must be formed. The example of Japan is often cited, where according to Anderson and Richie the film field is firmly ruled by six production companies, each controlling a segment of the market through ownership of theatres and through block booking.<sup>69</sup> Many who urge such a setup for India also cite the United States as an example, often unaware that the American industry, since the Supreme Court "divorcement" order of 1948, has experienced some fragmentation of its own.

While some urge solutions based on private control, others see hope only in a greater role for government. They propose nationalization of various portions, or all, of the industry. A plan apparently favored as early as 1951 by some members of the Film Enquiry Committee, but not recommended by the committee as a whole, was that the central government should take over all film distribution, leaving production and exhibition in private hands. Under such an arrangement, it was argued, the government would be able to control the industry from the middle, influence film production standards in a positive way, and bring the "black money" problem under control.

Others prominent in the film world have argued that the government should go still further. Among these, K. A. Abbas has argued for complete nationalization:

Unless the film industry is nationalized there is no hope for Indian films. The nature of the film economy of our country is such that a producer is bound to make bad films.

To the argument that there will be regimentation of thought in a nationalized film undertaking, I will say that there is no thought in Indian films today.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Anderson and Richie, *The Japanese Film*, p. 115.

<sup>70</sup> Quoted in *Statesman*, April 19, 1957.

In 1962 a bill was introduced in the Lok Sabha calling for appointment of a committee to plan the nationalization of the film industry.

Amid the proposals, the attacks, the criticisms, films are made, distributed, exhibited. Lines form at the box office. While new, unknown patterns may be in the offing, the old persist. In India the old and the new manage to live in surprising, sometimes dramatic, co-existence.

In April, 1962, millions of people gathered, in accordance with ancient tradition, at the town of Hardwar, where the Ganges emerges from Himalayan foothills onto the plains. Here the waters have a special sanctity, and every twelve years millions gather in a *kumbh mela*, a festival in the course of which they immerse themselves in the waters. On April 11 "an endless stream of pilgrims" moved toward the bathing ghats. Here and there a banner proclaimed in Sanskrit the futility of earthly pleasures. The pilgrims wound their way through thousands already arrived for the great festival. Each band of pilgrims signified its arrival with a parade to the holy waters. Mounted police provided escort. The *Times of India*, describing the event, tells us:

Parties of sadhus making weird noises and waving sticks today danced their way along the labyrinthine lanes of this town to the main bathing ghat. Spearheading the procession was a 20-piece band playing the latest popular film hit.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>71</sup> *Times of India*, April 12, 1962.

# *Conclusion*

The authors, dealing with various problems of the Indian film industry, have tried to report objectively the spectrum of views. In the course of such a survey, it is natural to form opinions on matters involved. The authors will briefly state their views on some of the issues touched on in preceding pages.

The bitterness surrounding the documentary film field is disturbing. It is understandable that the central government moved into this field on a massive scale. To serve pressing communication needs of a new nation, no other available medium offered comparable values. And the private film industry, in spite of early interest in topical, had never developed a strong documentary film sector.

Yet it is a pity that government moved into this field in a way that almost prevented such a sector from developing. Although monopoly was not the stated intention, monopoly was the almost certain result of policies adopted particularly the block-booking contract forced on theatres. Was such a contract necessary?

What would happen if, even now, the government amended this contract to permit any theatre to substitute, for a Films Division documentary it did not wish to exhibit, an approved film from a private source? Perhaps it would be too late ! such a change to provide incentive for private initiative in documentary production and distribution, yet the change might be a step toward creating such incentive. It would at least improve the position of the Films Division vis-à-vis its critics.

Very likely further changes would be necessary to make it possible for private initiative to survive in this field. A producer would find documentary production more feasible economically if a theatre could, at its option, retain an exceptional documentary for periods longer than the one-week bookings now established. A popular feature film sometimes stays at a theatre twenty or thirty weeks. In each of these weeks, it presumably reaches a largely different group.

Why should the accompanying documentary be changed each week? The weekly change makes sense for newsreels but hardly for documentaries. Would not one outstanding documentary, of the caliber of the Canadian *City of Gold* or the Dutch *Glass*, be preferred by any exhibitor to a series of pedestrian compilations? If an Indian film maker produced a documentary of exceptional quality and secured its approval by the Film Advisory Board, why should it not be booked into first-run theatres with a popular feature and remain throughout the run? At Films Division rates, such a distribution pattern might well make the production of documentaries a practical risk. And it is possible that first-run theatres would pay a higher rate to obtain quality. The exhibitors who complain of being forced to carry films of little audience interest would have less to complain of if they occasionally had a choice. And if such occasional choices existed, it would help the Films Division to arrive at a clearer estimate of the values of its own products, now untested by any rivalry, by any procedure of choice. The resulting stimulus to the Films Division itself might be one of the major benefits to be obtained. And it is unlikely that the annual income of the Films Division would be seriously reduced.

The zeal to produce documentary films does not appear to be widespread in the Indian film industry. But the conditions under which the industry grew up, under foreign domination, gave little scope for such zeal to develop. Where it exists now, coupled with talent and integrity, it should be given an outlet offering reasonable chance of financial survival. The current system of an "approved" panel of "independent" producers, making films of prescribed content under rigid Films Division supervision, in no sense answers that need. That system is only a part of the current machinery of Films Division monopoly.

In a sense, the umbrella of the Film Advisory Board guarantees a kind of monopoly, or at least a tight centralization of control. It may be open to question whether such strict control is sound policy in a democratic republic, especially when the entire broadcasting system is likewise under government control. But at present this strict control is coupled, in the field of documentaries and newsreels, with a complete one-unit domination of the whole machinery

of production and distribution. Here centralization reaches a point where it is stultifying to its own efforts. An artistic inbreeding results, and is exemplified by the overwhelming sameness of Indian documentary films. Under the circumstances this is inevitable, for many of those involved in their production hardly know that other kinds of documentaries are possible. Neither does the Indian film public.

In view of this, the authors asked some questions, which were a product of curiosity. Does the Film Advisory Board ever "approve" documentary films produced abroad? Do documentary film industries of other nations perhaps have something of occasional value for Indian audiences? The United Nations agencies have produced some fine films; why should such films, when appropriate to India, not be given approved status, and from time to time satisfy the requirement imposed on exhibitors, whether distributed through the Films Division or through others?

In answer to such questions, the authors received a puzzling array of answers. A Films Division executive stated that it would be a violation of regulations for the Film Advisory Board to approve a film produced outside India. An official of the Film Advisory Board stated, just as categorically, that there was no regulation to prevent the board from approving a foreign-produced film, although it had not happened. An official of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting stated equally categorically that it would be illegal for the Film Advisory Board to approve a foreign film. He explained that an element of compulsion was involved in the distribution of these films, that the propriety of this rested on . . . being in the national interest, and that this would be undermined if the products of other nations became involved. He could not cite the applicable law or laws.

Whatever the legal facts, the films going into theatres as approved films have all been films distributed by the Films Division, either produced, commissioned, or bought by the Films Division, and all have been Indian. While the legal confusion needs to be clarified, the severely domestic emphasis should perhaps also be examined. Even a slight infusion 'occasional documentaries from elsewhere could not only widen the horizons of the audience but

aid in the development of standards, both for the audience and for the Films Division.

The same set of principles applies to another problem discussed in an earlier chapter—the plight of Indian film societies. One of the potential values of a film society is illustrated by the career of Satyajit Ray, as well as of several other Calcutta directors. Their preparation for film making had as one of its major elements a study of film masterworks from all lands. Satyajit Ray could hardly have been so well prepared to communicate with world-wide audiences had he not had a sense of contact with many lands through a close knowledge of their films. Satyajit Ray, Chidananda Das Gupta, and others acquired that knowledge in the face of almost insuperable governmental obstacles. One set of obstacles was financial and included import duties, entertainment taxes, censorship levies. Can the revenue to be derived from a handful of nonprofit film societies possibly justify such harassment of a valuable educational mechanism, so recognized in many lands? Another set of obstacles was procedural, and included the necessity of endless forms for import and censorship procedures. Here government policy gave film societies a choice of accepting all the burdens placed on commercial ventures, or fleeing to the shelter of foreign embassies. The resulting dependence of a number of Indian film societies on foreign embassies may involve greater risks than exemption of such societies from censorship procedures.

Film societies serve different functions. As we have seen, one has to do with the development of future film makers. The National Film Theatre in London and the similar venture of the Cinéma-thèque in Paris have helped in recent years to raise a generation of film makers with a wide, sophisticated knowledge of film, its masterpieces of the past, and its current outstanding work in all lands. Indian film makers, by comparison, hardly have an inkling of what has been done and is being done elsewhere. An India-sponsored international film festival once in ten years is hardly equivalent to a continuing exposure to alternatives and possibilities.

Another kind of film society is university-based. Most of its members will not be film makers but may eventually have careers in government, education, business, or other fields in which wide acquaint-

ance with the films of the world, and the social roles they can play, can have varied values. But such societies can hardly exist without exemptions of the sort granted elsewhere. Exemption of a university-based film society from censorship procedures hardly involves national peril. If a university education does not allow and even encourage exposure to a diversity of views and attitudes, can it be an advanced education in any meaningful sense? In launching a University Film Council under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, and centralizing procurement of films for university film societies, the central government has taken a step that is economically helpful, but does not quite set the stage for vigorous development of such societies. The film society cannot generate vitality if treated as a mere outlet for what the central government considers safe and beneficial.

It has been a principal theme of our comments so far that the central government should make it easier for students and film makers to see a stimulating variety of films, including films from foreign lands. We realize that in taking such a view we are swimming against a tide of cultural nationalism. But we feel that modern India should remember well the words of its own leaders and saints. Among the favorite quotations of modern India are the words of Gandhi:

I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the culture of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible, but I refuse to be blown off my feet by any of them.<sup>1</sup>

Too many government officials have, in effect, revised this to make it read: "I do not want the culture of other lands to be blown about my house, lest it blow my people off their feet."

Such an attitude seems to be one of the driving forces behind the strict Indian censorship. It is our impression that India places unwarranted faith in censorship. Its censors often cut films to ribbons. How much do they accomplish? A film shown in India in 1962, *The Loves of Salammbo*—featuring an international cast, theoretically based on a work of Flaubert, and distributed by Twentieth Century-Fox—was 120 minutes long in its original form, and ap-

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, p. 367.

proximately 80 minutes long as shown in India. The censor board had carefully removed scenes of passion—making it suggestive rather than demonstrative—and according to its custom cut out all flimsy-garment sequences. Did the censors imagine for a moment that the film was less vulgar when they had finished with it? The case illustrates a danger. The producers of films of this sort are not worried about Indian censors. They make films with easily removable sequences, even alternative sequences. But producers of more meaningful films will not readily submit their films for such butchery. If *The Loves of Salammbo* meant no more and no less after several reels of pruning, the same would not be true of Ingmar Bergman's *The Virgin Spring*. The government of India was disappointed because its second international film festival, in 1961, elicited a cross-section of the world's second-rate films. It appears that in spite of the government's eleventh-hour instructions to its censor board to be indulgent toward festival films, many countries were reluctant to run the Indian censorship gantlet. What was true of this festival is true of Indian film imports in general. The exploitation films do not avoid India, but many of the finest films stay home.

One of the most frequent complaints against Indian censorship concerns films classified "A"—for adults only. Although such films are earmarked for adults, the adults are treated as children and the films as painstakingly scissored as films for children. A demand made repeatedly by producers seems well taken. If a film is to be limited to adults, should the adults perhaps have the right to see the work its creator intended?

Of the disputes surrounding the Indian film world, many concern the uneasy juxtaposition of the private and public sectors. In this respect the Indian film scene holds special interest. Its public sector presents an extreme of centralization, its private sector an extreme of fragmentation.

We have commented at some length on problems involving the documentary. But toward the over-all well-being of the film industry, the condition of the more influential feature film is, no doubt, of more crucial importance. Here we find a disorganized industry careening on its way, and government desperately trying to amend its course with a host of governmental devices. It may be well to at-

tempt a brief assessment of these devices and what they may have achieved.

One device is governmental action in film finance. The case of *Pather Panchali* demonstrated dramatically the possible values of such action. However, that a government role need not necessarily lead toward finer things has been amply suggested by subsequent cases. The West Bengal government, the very one which had made possible the completion of *Pather Panchali*, followed its success by financing another feature, *Dakater Hathe* (In the Clutches of the Dacoits). Announced as a film for children, it was perhaps one of the most horrifying products ever dedicated to the young. A state official justified it on the ground that "children like it."<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile the success of *Pather Panchali* also appears to have aided the birth of the central government's Film Finance Corporation. Again immediate results did not provide a *Pather Panchali*. The government, intent on sound management, entrusted the director of the Film Finance Corporation to a former income tax commissioner. The new corporation, intent on soundness, promptly loaned Rs. 500,000 for the completion of a new Shantaram version—this time in color—of the *Shakuntala* story. Named *Stree*, it presented a colorful spectacle, with a quota of musical numbers; distributors should have been willing to finance it in full. The Film Finance Corporation, whatever its potential, did not automatically lead to the breaking of new ground.

Another governmental film-improvement device is the Film Institute of India, through which the central government in 1961 undertook film training. As with the creation of the Film Finance Corporation, such a step had been recommended by the Film Enquiry Committee. The action was a recognition that the industry, in

<sup>2</sup> Synopsis: A boy and girl of well-to-do family are kidnaped by dacoits. There are unsuccessful attempts to arrange a ransom payment. Finally the dacoits sell the girl, drugged, to a white slaver for Rs. 300. The boy is turned over to a man who is thought to be a religious fanatic, of a sect still practicing human sacrifice. We see the boy prepared for the ritual by being cleansed in a pond, then tied down, ready to be slaughtered. Actually the supposed fanatic is a wicked relative of the children, intent on getting the boy's inheritance. Meanwhile one of the dacoits has repented and bought the girl back from the white slaver, and he now works to free them. A fire is lighted to signal police, who close in as the human sacrifice is about to take place. The state invested Rs. 75,000 in the film.

consequence of its fragmentation during and after the Second World War, had ceased to provide within its own structure any machinery for continued training. For the training venture the government bought the long-idle studios of Prabhat, standing in ghostly silence on a tract on the outskirts of Poona. Thus premises which in the days of Prabhat glory had served as a training school for many a rising artist became the setting for governmental instruction in film technique. The small group of students who began here in 1961 found at their disposal huge sound stages, as well as adjoining field and woodland complete with lakes, river banks, and concealed cable connections. It is difficult to imagine a more copious setting for training.

But again, government action in this field will not automatically lead to finer things. The curriculum of the school runs in danger of a narrow technical approach. Indian producers long believed that if they had a few more of the technical secrets held by others they could make films which would unlock world markets. However, the eventual triumph was not one of technical know-how. This was not the missing magic. The Film Institute of India is in peril of a similar misguided faith in technology—as though splicers, Moviolas, and zoom lenses hold the secrets of great film making. Again we make a plea that technical learning, essential as it is, be developed within a framework of broad study of the arts, including film masterpieces of many lands. Without such a frame of reference, such a stretching of horizons, such a multiplication of alternatives, students will end by imitating yesterday's big-grossing Indian film. They will be studying how to be tomorrow's Dilip Kumar, Raj Kapoor, or Sivaji Ganesan.

Another governmental film-improvement mechanism has been the presidential and other state awards. These awards, instituted in 1954 "with the object of encouraging the production of films of a high aesthetic and technical standard and of educational and cultural value,"<sup>3</sup> have scarcely been mentioned in this volume, since their impact appears to have been negligible. Film makers have no doubt been delighted to receive cash prizes but there is no evidence that their existence has influenced the decisions and choices

<sup>3</sup> *Indian Films*, p. 2.

*Appendix : INDIAN FILM PRODUCTION STATISTICS, BY LANGUAGE.*

	Hindi	Tamil	Bengali	Telugu	Marathi	Gujarati	Kannada	Malayalam	Punjabi	Assamese	Orissa	Other *
1931	23	1	3	1	2	8	2					
1932	61	4	5	2	5	6	2					
1933	75	7	9	11	3	1	1	2	1			1
1934	121	14	10	5	7	9	1	1	1	1	1	2
1935	154	38	19	12	6	4						
1936	134	38	19	12	6	4						
1937	102	37	16	10	11	11						
1938	88	39	19	10	14							
1939	82	95	15	12	12							
1940	86	36	16	14	10	1	1	1	1			
1941	78	32	18	15	13							
1942	97	18	16	8	14							
1943	105	15	21	6	7	4						
1944	86	14	14	6	4							
1945	7	11	9	5								
1946	156	17	15	5								
1947	181	30	32	6	6	1	1	1	1			
1948	141	32	38	7	7	27	5					
1949	156	21	62	7	15	17	1	1	1	1	1	3
1950	114	19	42	18	19	13	1	6	1	2	2	1
1951	100	26	38	21	16	6	2	7	4	1	1	1
1952	103	32	43	17	2	1	10					
1953	96	42	50	21	7	7	3	1	1	1	1	2
1954	118	36	47	27								
1955	126	46	52	24	13	3	10	8	3	1	1	2
1956	123	50	54	28	13	3	15	7	2	2	1	3
1957	115	46	54	36	14	5						
1958	116	62	45	35	16	1	14	7	2	3	1	2
1959	121	77	38	47	10	1	11	4	1	2	1	3
1960	120	63	36	54	15	2	5	9	1	5	2	1
1961	95	49	34	55	15	7	12	6	4	5	2	2
1962	91	61	37	48	22	5	16	15	5	2	2	3

\* Other: Arabic, Burmese, English, German, Konkani, Malay, Marwari, Nepalese, Persian, Pushtu, Sindhi, Sinhalese.

The table is based on lists of released feature films compiled by the Film Federation of India. The titles of all sound films released through 1955 (and some of 1956) are listed in *Indian Talkie*, 1931-56, published by the Federation. Government film statistics, based on censorship records, vary somewhat from the above figures.



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Abbas, K. A., writer  
Abraham, David, actor  
Agarwal, G., distributor  
Agte, B. Y., distributor  
Anand, Inder Raj, writer  
Babu, Chitti, distributor  
Bahadur, Satish, social scientist  
Baji, A. R., public servant  
Bakaya, M., executive  
Banerjee, Jithen, technician  
Barua, Shyamalesh, technician  
Bhanja, Manujendra, journalist  
Bhasker, K. Dayanand, executive  
Bhat, M. D., public servant  
Bhatia, Vanraj, musicologist  
Bode, Homi, journalist  
Bose, Ajit, producer  
Bose, Debaki, producer  
Bose, Madhu, director  
Chatterjee, M. D., distributor  
Chettiyar, T. S. P. L. P. Chidambaram, financier  
Dasarathy, B. S., public servant  
Das Gupta, Chidananda, executive  
Das Gupta, Dhiren, technician  
Das Gupta, Hari S., producer  
Das Gupta, Prabir, distributor  
Desai, Chimanlal, producer  
Devi, Kanan, actress  
Dewan, Karan, actor  
Ganesan, Sivaji, actor  
Ganguly, Dhiren, producer  
Ghosh, N. K., journalist  
Gohar, actress  
Gole, R. S., executive  
Gopalan, S., public servant  
Gupta, Anuva, actress  
Irani, Ardesir M., producer  
Ishwar, R. V., executive  
Iyer V. A. P., distributor  
Jagirdar, Gajanan, actor  
Kannamba, actress  
Kapoor, Ram, publicist  
Keskar, B. V., public servant  
Khan, Mehbob R., producer  
Khandpur, K. L., producer  
Khemka, B. L., producer  
Khote, Durga, actress  
Kothari, D. L., public servant  
Krishnamurti, S., distributor  
Krishnaswamy, M. V., producer  
Kulandaivelu, R., public servant  
Madan, J. J., producer  
Mani, Battling, actor  
Mathur, J. C., public servant  
Mathur, M. P., public servant  
Mathur, P. S., public servant  
Mathuram, T. A., actress  
Mehrotra, N. D., public servant  
Mehta, C. C., writer  
Meiyappan, A. V., producer  
Menon, I. K., executive  
Mir, Ezra, producer  
Modi, Sohrab, producer  
Mukherji, Subodh, executive  
Munshi, K. M., lawyer  
Munsat, Lilavati, publicist  
Naidu, S. M. S., producer  
Nath, Mahendra, executive  
Natkarni, P. M., distributor  
Padmanabhan, R., producer  
Parthasarathy, S., journalist  
Pati, Promode, director  
Patil, Neelakantlu, translator  
Pillai, S. S., journalist  
Pochee, E. A., distributor

**Prabhu, P. V., distributor**  
**Pramanick, D., executive**  
**Pratap, K., public servant**  
**Ragini, actress**  
**Rajakumari, T. R., actress**  
**Ramachandra, C., music director**  
**Ramachandran, M. G., actor**  
**Ramachandran, S., technician**  
**Ramadhyani, R. K., public servant**  
**Raman, V., technician**  
**Ramanathan, G., music director**  
**Ramanujam, C. N., exhibitor**  
**Ramnoth, T. V., journalist**  
**Rao, Veeranki Rama, executive**  
**Ray, Satyajit, producer**  
**Reddi, B. N., producer**  
**Reddi, Gopala, public servant**  
**Roerich, Devika Rani, actress**  
**Roy, Bimal, producer**  
**Sampath, E. V. K., public servant**  
**Sanyal, Pahari, actor**  
**Sanyal, Sudhirendra, journalist**  
**Sathe, V., writer**  
**Sen, Asit, director**  
**Seshadri, R. M., lawyer**  
**Seton, Marie, writer**  
**Seyne, Benoyendra, technician**  
**Shah, Chandulal, producer**  
**Shantaram, V., producer**  
**Sharma, Kidar, producer**  
**Sharina, Rajendra, director**  
**Shirur, R. M., distributor**  
**Sinha, Tapan, director**  
**Sircar, B. N., producer**  
**Srinivasan, C., executive**  
**Subbalakshmi, S. D., actress**  
**Subrahmanyam, K., producer**  
**Subramaniam, C., public servant**  
**Sundaram, S. D., writer**  
**Sundaram, T. R., producer**  
**Vaidyanathan, K. S., distributor**  
**Vasagam, S. K., journalist**  
**Vasudevan, T. E., producer**  
**Venkat, T. K., technician**  
**Venkataraman, R., public servant**  
**Venkatraman, K., financier**  
**Wadia, J. B. H., producer**

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